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Vintage SUPER ROMANCE

Back in Texas

ROXANNE RUSTAND

Roxanne Rustand
Back In Texas

Аннотация

Desperate times call for desperate measuresThat's why the dying town of Homestead, Texas, established the Home Free program, offering land grants in exchange for the much-needed professional services modern homesteaders bring with them.Kristin Cantrell had leaped at the chance to return to her childhood home, accepting subsidized land for herself and her son in exchange for the service she could offer as a physician's assistant. She didn't expect her reputation to be tarnished by a crime her deceased father had supposedly committed. She also didn't expect to see Ryan Gallagher again, even though his father, the senator, practically owned the Hill Country.Now she has to prove not only her father's innocence but also her own.

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Clint climbed stiffly out of the car

The tense silence on the way to town had proved that nothing in the rocky relationship between Ryan and his father had changed over the passing years…and it never would.

"Doc Grady died five years ago, and there hasn't been a doctor here since. What the hell does that tell you?" Clint glared at Ryan. "This guy probably couldn't get a job in a real town—or got chased out of the one he was at. If he's any good, why in God's name would he come to a town like this?"

Excellent point. Ryan looked down the deserted sidewalk, taking in the boarded-up storefronts and empty parking spaces. The Homestead, Texas, city limits sign still claimed a population of 2,504, but he'd bet a thousand of those people had long since left for better jobs and a brighter future.

"You're not having heart surgery here—just a quick checkup and some lab work." Ryan opened the door of the clinic. "I'm sure the guy can handle that much."

Clint brushed past Ryan as he went inside. He thrust an impatient hand toward the empty receptionist's desk. "See? No one's here."

The decor was nearly the same as it had been back when Ryan was growing up. Curling brown linoleum. Faded Western prints on the walls. He eyed the same hard wooden chairs he'd sat on as a kid, knowing that after a few minutes on one of them he'd

have trouble walking.

"Can I help you two?"

The woman's quiet voice slid through him like a bayonet, and as if from miles away he heard his father swear under his breath.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the beautiful Texas Hill Country. In Back in Texas, a wounded ex-army Ranger returns to his family's troubled ranch. Though he's long been estranged from his father, state senator Clint Gallagher, Ryan is determined to save his brothers' legacy from financial ruin. He knows the job won't be easy, but he doesn't expect to find that someone is very concerned about him uncovering old secrets. And he certainly doesn't expect to run into the only woman he ever loved—a woman who walked out on him years ago. I hope you'll enjoy the story of Ryan Gallagher and Kristin Cantrell as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Back in Texas is the first book in the five-author HOME TO LOVELESS COUNTY miniseries. The stories all center on a dying town and the people who move there as part of a modern-day homesteading program. They're each in search of new beginnings, but some of them find far more than they expected.

I love hearing from readers. There are contests, articles, photos, a free downloadable cookbook and previews of upcoming books at www.roxannerustand.com and www.booksbyrustand.com. You can write me at

R.Rustand@Juno.com or P.O. Box 2550, Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52406-2550. If you send a business-size SASE, I'll send you bookmarks and other goodies!

Wishing you peace, prosperity and love,

Roxanne Rustand

Back in Texas
Roxanne Rustand

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To K.N. Casper, Linda Warren, Roz Denny Fox and Lynnette Kent, who are the authors of the upcoming books in this series. Your professionalism, dedication and warmth made this project an absolute joy.

And, as always, to my family with deepest appreciation for your patience and support. And especially to my teenage daughter Emily, who is a fabulous cook and makes us wonderful dinners when I'm on deadline. I feel so blessed—even when she makes me gain ten pounds in the process!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the generous people who provided so much research material for this book: Cindi Myers and Texan James Marshall for detailed information on the Texas Hill Country. Heartfelt thanks to author Kylie Brant for her invaluable advice, and lawyers Mary Strand and Tom Fraser for their assistance regarding the law and their profession. Any mistakes are mine alone.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ONLY WAY Ryan Gallagher had figured he'd ever come back to Four Aces Ranch was if he arrived in a government-issue casket.

Returning home on his own power had never been part of his plans.

Now, standing at the entryway of the main house, he glanced over his shoulder at the deeply rolling land stretching to the horizon. Every gnarled cedar, every rocky outcropping stirred a flood of memories he couldn't hold at bay.

He'd been gone fifteen years, barring two brief trips home to see his brother married and his grandfather buried. It hadn't been long enough.

Ryan shook off his reservations. Just a few months, maybe less. How could this be any harder than Ward 57 back at Walter Reed?

Turning back to the ornately carved oak door with Four Aces Ranch written in sweeping script between images of champion quarter horses and prize cattle, Ryan knocked before letting himself in.

Nothing but the best, his father had always said. From the livestock and land acquisitions, to every ostentatious detail of his massive brick house, Clint Gallagher still wasn't finished trying to impress the world.

His decades as a Texas State Senator had never been enough for him.

"I don't believe it." Adelfa stood transfixed in the middle of the foyer on her way to answer his knock. The elderly housekeeper's dark eyes filled with tears as she drank in the sight of him from head to toe. "Madre de dios! I never thought I'd find you at this door!"

Steeling himself against the pain radiating through his shoulder, Ryan enveloped the stocky Hispanic woman in a hug. "And nothing could be better than finding you're still here."

He released her, surprised by his reluctance to step away from Adelfa's familiar scent—cinnamon and the Chanel he always sent her for Christmas and birthdays. "You still make this place home," he added, brushing a kiss on her wrinkled brow. "Only you."

"Your father could not always be here when you boys were young." She frowned, as quick to defend her employer of forty-some years as she'd always been to stand up to him. "He is a busy man…an importante senador."

And to her, that made everything right. She was, Ryan realized with chagrin, every bit as loyal as his fellow Rangers, even if her loyalty was misplaced. "So, is Clint here?"

"Si." Adelfa cast a glance over her shoulder, her brow furrowed. "But…he is not such a happy man tonight."

Ryan threw his head back and laughed for the first time in months. "Tell me when that wasn't true."

She clucked at him, her mouth a stern line. “He has many responsibilities. Phone calls. Visitors. The newspapers—aye, they still send their reporters out here, looking for a good story.”

“Clint always knew how to use the press,” Ryan retorted dryly. “The reporters were either in his pocket or wanted to be.”

Adelfa rocked back on her heels and crossed her arms over her ample chest, muttering rapid-fire Spanish phrases under her breath.

He caught every word and grinned at her. “I agree. He won’t listen to anything I say, and this visit will be a big mistake if I just upset him.”

A deep blush worked its way into her plump cheeks. “Some things, they just don’t got a fix to ’em,” she murmured.

“For Garrett and Trevor’s sake, I’m staying for a couple months. By then, we’ll either have this ranch straightened out, or Dad and I will have dueled out in the desert.”

Her harrumph spoke louder than words. “So you have talked to your brothers?”

“Not yet, I understand they ran out of options, and figured I was their best bet. They asked Leland to track me down.” The certified letter from the Four Ace’s lawyer had caught up with Ryan in Georgia several weeks ago. “Maybe they think I’m less likely to walk out than someone hired off the street.”

“You and your father are both stubborn and strong as two bulls.” There was a note of pride in Adelfa’s voice as she sized him up. “For nothing more than that, you would stay now to prove

him wrong."

"I don't much care what he thinks about me, and I'm not intimidated by what he says. You know how well we get along." Ryan gave her a quick wink. "For that reason alone I'm probably the best person for the job. I hear the ranch is in financial trouble."

At the faint jingle of spurs, Ryan turned and found his middle brother, Trevor, grinning at him from the doorway, dressed in his usual faded Levi's with a plaid Western shirt stretched across his burly chest. He held a dusty Stetson.

Ryan extended his hand, but Trevor ignored it and gave him a bear hug before stepping back for a thorough appraisal.

"Long time," he drawled. "You looked a mite peaked the last time I saw you. Musta been that fancy gown…or maybe it was because those nurses moved a lot faster'n you could."

"I barely remember those first days at Reed." Ryan closed his eyes against the flashes of fuzzy images…the beep of his morphine drip…the glare of fluorescent lights, day and night. Somewhere, in that fractured catalog of memories, he had a vague picture of Trevor's worried face as he bent over the bed. "You were there, right?"

Trevor snorted. "Not for long. You ordered us to go home and leave you in peace. You were so surly about it, day after day, that the nurses finally encouraged us to keep in touch by phone."

Ryan winced. "Must've been the medication."

Trevor shot him a wicked smile. "Bein' unwanted and all, we

finally had to turn tail and go home in disgrace."

"I don't know what to say, except that I'm sorry."

Adelfa searched Ryan's face. "They took good care of you, I hope. Good food? A good bed? We worried about you, every day."

"Well…not a whole heck of a lot," Trevor added. "Me and Garrett figured you were just too mean to die."

Adelfa gripped Ryan's forearm for a minute, as if for reassurance, then lumbered back to the kitchen, muttering in Spanish.

"She lit candles for you at the church," Trevor said in a low voice. "She had a little shrine here, on the sideboard in the dining room, and had candles going there, too, and she never said grace at a meal without adding prayers for your healing." His voice broke. "Damn, it's good to see you again."

Ryan swallowed the unfamiliar lump in his throat. "Same here."

"And Dad—" Trevor looked away. "Well, he was in the middle of trying to get some bill passed. He couldn't make it out to Washington, D.C. with us, but I know he was concerned, and he did make some phone calls."

Concerned? Ryan laughed. "I hope that didn't interfere with his schedule."

Trevor glanced over Ryan's shoulder into the house, his eyes troubled, then he hitched a thumb toward the main horse barn. "Maybe we should go have a talk, before he finds out you're here.

Got a minute?"

Ryan shoved his battered duffel bag to one side of the doorway with his boot. "My time is yours."

Trevor led the way to the pine-paneled office in the main horse barn, just inside the double doors.

"Looks like you're doing well," Ryan said with a dry laugh, nodding toward shelves crowded with quarter horse championship trophies and framed Superior and Register of Merit award certificates. "Last time I was here, the trophies only filled one wall."

"I spend a lot of my time on the road now. We hit most of the major show circuits west of the Mississippi." Trevor shrugged. "It's good for business."

Ryan sauntered over to the five-tier racks of show saddles and the glittering rows of silver-encrusted show halters, bridles and breast collars hanging from padded hooks. "I'll be damned." He rested a hand on the custom-made saddle that had been his, a lifetime ago. "I'm surprised this is still here."

"Of course it is. It's yours." Trevor motioned to a couple of leather barrel chairs in front of the cluttered desk, then tossed his hat on one of them, propped a hip on the edge of the desk and rubbed his face. The premature gray in his dark hair and the deep lines creasing his cheeks made him look far older than thirty-two.

"It's good to have you back. Things have been tough here—real tough. What did Leland tell you in the letter?"

"Mostly things I already heard. That Oscar moved away and

left the financial records in a hell of a mess, then the new foreman embezzled a lot of money." Ryan leaned back in his chair. "Did anyone check out Oscar to see if he was involved?"

"He went back to Mexico and we lost track of him, but we all thought he was an honest man. Experienced hand with cattle, though he managed just basic record keeping and never did understand that dinosaur of a computer. Hardly capable of pulling off embezzlement."

"And the next man?"

"Dad fired Oscar's replacement four months later." Trevor shook his head in disgust. "Lucky, or Nate would've had more time to steal us blind. Leland says we'll never know the full extent of that loss."

"Nate Cantrell?" Ryan stared at him. "I knew there were problems, but never heard all the details."

"You haven't been back since. I thought I wrote you…but hell, with you halfway around the world most of the time, maybe that letter never caught up." Trevor's brow furrowed. "Crazy isn't it? A local guy, doing something like that to people he knows."

"All I remember is that he and dad had occasional business dealings over the years." The name brought other, less welcome memories, but none Trevor needed to hear.

"After Nate, Dad hired a string of business managers who either quit or were fired, and now he's trying to do it himself. He's trying to get me to do it," Trevor amended. "Shoot, I never went to college. I don't know anything about accounting—and

I'm out working with the cattle from dawn to dusk as it is. I've tried, but he gets impatient. Then he works on it himself and…" He took a deep breath. "You know about him, right?"

"That he's an arrogant old coot? That he's probably making your life miserable?"

Trevor stood and wandered over to the saddle racks, where he absentmindedly began polishing the silver cantle plate on a Billy Royal cutting saddle with the cuff of his shirt. "His eyes, Ryan. He won't admit it to anyone. I only know because I happened to see a billing slip from his last ophthalmology appointment. He's got macular degeneration. He's also got high cholesterol and a bad heart, but I damn sure haven't had any luck making him go in for his checkups. He's long overdue—and one of these days, he's gonna drop in his tracks."

"All this at sixty?"

"His vision upsets him the most. He'll spend hours in his office in the house poring over bills and reports, but I can tell he's struggling. It's no wonder he didn't catch what was going on—he can barely see to read."

Ryan sat back in his chair trying to absorb the enormity of that news. Clint was well-known as a powerful force in state and local politics; a wheeler-dealer who was ruthless in his business dealings and who carefully cultivated a broad spectrum of cronies to help him meet his ends. What was it like for him, now that he faced the potential loss of his independence?

"Can't the lawyer help out with all of this?"

“Leland is on retainer. Dad consults him on financial matters sometimes—investments and so on—and he has limited power of attorney to oversee major business decisions if Dad isn’t available. He doesn’t cover day-to-day management. It might be different if he was always in town, but he lives in San Antonio and just comes to his satellite office in Homestead a couple days a week. I can’t do it all, no matter what Dad thinks. Frankly, I don’t even know where to begin. So—” Trevor ended on a long sigh “—we’ve had overdue notices. The hunting lease program is a mess. Records are missing. Dad is land rich and cash poor right now, and last winter he missed a chance to pick up a big piece of property that borders the Four Aces.”

“He needs more land?”

“You know Dad.” Trevor shook his head. “Money. Power. Land. He wants it all, but the K-Bar-C was far more than that. It controls the aquifer that supplies a large percentage of our land. It was tangled in foreclosure for over a year. When it finally came up for sale, he couldn’t pull enough money together in time. That still rankles him to no end.”

“I’ll bet.” Ryan gave a short laugh. In Texas, prime access to a substantial underground aquifer could mean the difference between bankruptcy and success. “He’s never been one to lose happily. What about Nate—has he been caught?”

“He died a few months after being fired. Leland worked for a couple weeks on the bookkeeping disaster Nate left, then gave up and hired a forensic accountant and a private investigator. They

discovered that money disappeared through cash withdrawals, and large checks to fictitious companies in Austin and Dallas. Some was filtered into an account in Llano, in the name of a nonexistent crop-spraying service. That doesn't account for all of it, though…not even close, from what we can tell."

"Was any of it recovered?"

Trevor snorted. "Very little."

"Do you have a copy of that report?"

Trevor hitched a thumb toward a bank of drawers behind the desk. "In there—but it really doesn't say any more than we already knew."

"What about the sheriff? Didn't he investigate?"

"Dad said he wanted to keep this quiet until he had enough evidence." Trevor lifted a brow. "Personally, I think he was more worried about the election year ahead—didn't want voters thinking he'd mismanaged his own business. And knowing Dad, he probably has a few financial affairs he doesn't want brought to light."

"But when Nate died, surely—"

"Nope. The P.I. discovered that Nate had quite a gambling problem, so it must have disappeared on the gaming tables. There was no paper trail indicating he'd transferred the money to anyone else." At a sharp rap on the doorjamb, Ryan looked over his shoulder.

Clint stood there, as tall and imposing as ever, his lean, hard face reddened and his eyes flashing with anger. "Guess I'm part

of this here discussion, wouldn't you say?"

No hello, no good to see you. Which was, Ryan reflected, no surprise at all. "Hey," he said lazily, lifting a hand from the arm of his chair in greeting.

"Adelfa said you two were out here." Clint glared at his sons. "You should have come to my office."

Trevor cleared his throat. "I just—"

"I haven't seen my brothers in a good long while, Dad." Ryan swung out of his chair and met Clint's steely expression head-on, knowing that any show of sympathy or support for the old man would likely spark a tirade. "When I run into Garrett, I plan to have a good, long visit with him, too."

An uncomfortable silence lengthened until at last Clint swore under his breath, stalked into the room and scraped a chair against the floor before dropping into it. He gave Trevor a narrowed glance. "I understand you and Garrett sent for Ryan. It wasn't necessary."

"Sounds like it was," Ryan said mildly, leaning a shoulder against the wall. "I understand y'all need some short-term help to get everything back in order. After that, you can bring in a new business manager, and I'll be out of here."

"Interference, that's what it is," Clint snapped. "You had no right."

"Trevor didn't hire anyone behind your back, Dad. He and Garrett asked me to come home for a while and pitch in." Ryan gentled his voice to a lethal, dead-calm tone. "I know I have no

stake in this place anymore, and I sure as hell know how you feel. Believe me, I wouldn't have come back if I hadn't felt I owed it to my brothers to make sure their legacy was secure."

OVER THE YEARS he'd captured infiltrators. Rescued team members from impossible situations. Tracked, caught and interrogated enemies who would have welcomed death and the chance to take him right along with them.

Convincing his arrogant and irritable father to get into his own Lincoln the next morning and driving him to town—winning a ten-dollar bet with Trevor in the process—had been one of the greatest challenges of all.

Glancing at the sign over the door of the small clinic, Ryan stepped out onto the street and pocketed the car keys. "I'm sure this Dr. Hernandez is competent, Dad. We were lucky to get you in this morning."

Clint climbed stiffly out of the car and straightened to his full six-foot-one height, his hand still on the open door of the car. From his thick white hair to the tips of his custom-made Lucchese boots, he exuded an imperious air of power—the Texas kind, an unshakable belief that he controlled everything in his part of the world.

The tense silence in the car on the way to town had proved that nothing in the rocky relationship between them had changed over the passing years…and it never would.

"Doc Grady died five years ago, and there hasn't been a doctor here since. What the hell does that tell you?" Clint leveled a glare

at Ryan. “This guy probably couldn’t get a job in a real town—or got chased out of the one he was at. If he’s any good, why in God’s name would he come to a town like this?”

Excellent point. Ryan looked down the deserted sidewalk, taking in the boarded-up storefronts and empty parking spaces. The only signs of life were a couple of old gents dozing on benches in front of the massive, yellow stone courthouse across the street, and a handful of dusty pickups nosed up to the local diner.

The Homestead, Texas, city limits sign still claimed a population of 2,504, but he’d bet a good thousand of those people had long since fled the area, for better jobs and a brighter future.

“You’re not having heart surgery here—just a quick checkup and some lab work,” Ryan said dryly. He opened the door of the clinic, and jingled the car keys in his pocket. “I’m sure the guy can handle that much. Get this over with, and we can go home. Unless you want to drive clear into Austin, fight traffic and sit in a busy waiting room all day for the same thing.”

Clint stalked to the clinic and brushed past Ryan as he went inside, muttering under his breath. He thrust an impatient hand toward the empty receptionist’s desk. “See? No one’s here.”

“But the door was open and the lights are on. Adelfa called and talked to someone here just an hour ago.”

The decor was nearly the same as it had been back when Ryan used to come here. Curling brown linoleum. Faded Western prints on the walls. He eyed the same, hard wooden chairs he’d

sat on as a kid, knowing that after a few minutes in one of them, he'd have trouble walking.

An inexplicable, eerie sensation prickled at the back of Ryan's neck as he walked farther into the room. He spun back to look at the open front door. There was nothing there. What the hell…?

From behind him, he heard soft footsteps come down the hallway leading to the exam rooms. A rustle of papers.

"Hi, can I help you two?"

The quiet voice slid through him like a bayonet.

As if from miles away, he heard his father swear under his breath….

And then he felt the earth shift beneath his feet.

CHAPTER TWO

HER VOICE WAS FIRM, with no hint of the old, familiar flirtatiousness, but those six, simple words had the impact of a round from an M-16.

Ryan turned slowly, wishing he'd lost this morning's bet with Trevor, and looked into the eyes of the woman who'd left him fifteen years ago.

It took him a good five seconds—nearly a lifetime—to find his voice.

"I…thought you'd moved away from here, Kristin," he said, dropping his gaze to her white running shoes, snug jeans and white lab coat opened to reveal a Texas A&M T-shirt, before finally meeting her eyes again.

She acknowledged Clint with a nod, but her attention was on Ryan; her shock apparent when she saw the thin, ragged scar trailing from his temple to the corner of his jaw. "Years ago, I—I heard you were missing."

He hitched his good shoulder. "Yeah, well…maybe for a while."

"For a while, people even thought you were…"

"Dead? Not quite." At her stark expression, he regretted his flippant answer. Apparently even Kristin Cantrell had feelings, somewhere in her cold, dark heart.

"S-so you've moved to the ranch, then?" She paused.

“Everything’s okay now?”

“Fine. But I won’t be here long.” He stared into her light blue eyes, so startling in contrast against her long, dark blond hair and late-summer tan. His gaze unconsciously slid to her bare ring finger before he jerked it back to her eyes.

She was more beautiful than she’d been at nineteen. Maturity had brought sharper definition to her cheekbones and an elegance that had been just innocent girlishness before. He nearly laughed aloud at that. Innocence. As if.

Long ago—not that he cared—he’d heard she’d married Ted Peters, a banker’s son they’d both known in college. Not a surprise, really. For her, it had always been about money.

Old memories, best left forgotten, he thought grimly. None of them mattered anymore.

She found her voice again before he could, though her face was pale and she seemed to have an overly strong grip on the documents she held. “A woman called to make this appointment for a physical, but with her accent I didn’t catch the name clearly. I—I didn’t realize—” she cleared her throat “—that it was for you.”

“It’s my father. He needs—”

“Absolutely nothing from another Cantrell.” Clint leveled a frosty glare at Kristin, then stalked to the door. “I’ll be in the car.”

An awkward silence lengthened as they both stared after him. Finally, Kristin looked at Ryan, embarrassed, and moved to the reception desk where she ran a finger down a column in the

appointment book. “Apparently neither of you knew I was going to be working here. Um…we have other openings, if you think he’d be willing to come back.”

Ryan frowned, remembering her dreams of becoming a pediatrician. Her vow to never return to Homestead. “You… manage this place?”

“I’m a physician’s assistant, now. We’re formally opening this satellite clinic on Tuesday, but I’ve seen a few walk-ins early. Dr. Lou—Louisa Hernandez—will just be here on alternate Wednesdays.”

Clint probably wouldn’t want to see a female physician, either, but it might be worth a try…especially if Trevor or Garrett could be conned into the trip. “Next week, then?”

“He could see me anytime. We haven’t even started scheduling appointments yet, so the book is open.” She smiled regretfully. “If he prefers the doctor, he’ll have to wait two weeks, or he’ll need to drive clear over to the main clinic in San Antonio.”

“While I’m home, I need to get him set up locally. It’ll be that much easier for Trevor when…” Ryan hesitated. Clint would resent his sharing personal information if he didn’t end up a patient here. “When Dad gets older. Just give him another appointment on Tuesday morning, and I’ll make sure he gets here.”

“I know this is difficult for all of us. Tell him that he doesn’t need to worry, I won’t ever refer to the past.” The hint of sadness in her voice was almost believable. “Has he been under the care

of another physician?”

Ryan nodded. “Apparently someone in Austin, but from what Trevor says, Dad has never been good about keeping appointments and taking his medications. He probably needs complete lab work in addition to a checkup.”

Kristin wrote on an appointment card and held it out. “Nine o’clock.”

Ryan flinched as he reached for it, the sharp pain in his shoulder reminding him about the empty prescription bottles in the glove box of his truck. Damn. Taking a deep breath, he fought the urge to close his eyes and lean against the wall until the dizziness passed.

“Are you all right?” Kristin stepped around the desk and hesitated, her hand hovering above his arm.

He gave the slightest shake of his head, wishing he could back away and get out of there without another word, but well aware that he probably wouldn’t make it to the door.

“Can I get you something? A glass of water?”

He didn’t try to disguise his irritation, hating his weakness, his inadequacy. Hating the attention and sympathy it always drew. “Leave…me…alone.”

She grabbed a chair, settling it behind him and gently took his other arm. “Sit, for God’s sake, unless you want to leave here in an ambulance. If you go over on this hard floor, you’ll end up with a concussion.”

Pride and stubbornness kept him upright, his anger subsiding

as the sensation of vertigo faded. “I’m fine. Really.”

“Right. And I’m Mary Poppins.” Kristin took a step back and folded her arms across her chest, clearly now in professional mode. “Tell me. What happened to you?”

He managed what he hoped was a semblance of a smile. “Just a little…altercation.”

“A little one.” Her voice was filled with disbelief. “How long ago?”

“Six months. It’s nothing.”

“Right. And I bet you sleep like a baby, no problems at all. Are you in physical therapy? Do you take anything for pain?”

“I—” He swallowed a sharp reply, suddenly tired of being defensive. Tired of the whole damned deal that had jerked him out of active service and into a world of surgery and pain, and empty promises from docs who didn’t have the guts to tell him the truth. “I do need some refills. Can a Texas P.A. write prescriptions?” he asked, more roughly than he’d intended.

“Yes, after you’ve established a relationship with that clinic.”

Damn. “So I have to wait until I can see the doc?”

He stifled a sigh. He could get along without most of his medications just fine, but the Skelaxin helped him keep moving during a bad day. And now and then, the Percocet was his only relief when the burning, throbbing pain in his shoulder or knee kept him awake until three in the morning.

When he finally fell into troubled sleep on those nights, the nightmares would return, and then he’d lie there wishing that he’d

died in that godforsaken place instead of Tony and Dave and all the others. He rarely gave in and took the meds. But when he truly needed them…

She must've read his thoughts, because she touched his arm and smiled. "I can take care of this, easily."

She handed him a clipboard from the counter. "Fill out this health history. If you don't have your medical records, you'll need to sign a release so we can request them by fax."

He wished he'd just walked out the door. Confidentiality of medical records was mandated by federal law. But sharing personal information—having anyone read about the injuries that made him weak and useless now—still rankled.

And though there was nothing between them any longer, revealing those details of his life to Kristin Cantrell was a thousand times worse.

"I…have a folder of photocopies out in my truck."

"Good, then. I'll start a chart while you get it. After you fill out this form, I'll take your vitals and you'll be set." She lifted a brow. "Are you game?"

There was a distinct challenge in her voice and her businesslike manner. She'd been such a sweet, shy little thing in college, wide-eyed at the world around her. Now she wore a much tougher veneer, and he could almost imagine her taking over a platoon.

In a few minutes he was back inside. He handed her the paperwork, then followed her down the empty hallway to an

exam room. “Are you the only person here?”

“Our clinic nurse starts Tuesday.” She motioned him to the exam table, then flipped open the folder. “Oh, my God. You were at Walter Reed?”

He nodded.

“So this was no little bar fight, then.” She took a deep breath, clearly stunned. “You should go down to the Kerrville VA Medical Center. It would cost you a lot less, and—”

“No.”

“But—”

“I saw the doctor at Reed just last week. I don’t need to see anyone else.” His feisty doc back at the hospital had been sure Ryan would refuse to seek ongoing medical care, so the man had provided just enough capsules for the trip west, along with printed orders on what had to be represcribed by a local doctor. “Look, my dad’s outside talking to Arlen Enfield, but he won’t want to wait long.”

“Enfield…the former mayor?” She glanced up at Ryan, then started jotting something on the margins of the medical report. “Nice guy. I met him last winter, when I visited here.”

Enfield was tall, sophisticated. Urbane, with a propensity for saying just the right thing, but nice wasn’t the word Ryan would’ve used.

Who could forget the subtle animosity between the two men? Both wealthy ranchers, they’d been political rivals over the years. Intelligent, driven and competitive, they reminded him of two

old dogs circling each other with hackles raised. “Can we make this quick?”

“Fine.” She took his blood pressure, weight and listened to his lungs, asking questions and jotting notes in a chart as she went.

She was pure, cool professionalism. But with every touch of her delicate hands, he had to force himself to be still, to betray no reaction. He hoped she didn’t sense his tension.

Only after he’d walked out the door of the clinic was he finally able to haul his thoughts back to the present.

Trevor would definitely need to bring Dad into the clinic on Tuesday, because seeing Kristin again was the last thing Ryan wanted.

No Ranger with a 60mm mortar could have done a better job of destroying his heart.

KRISTIN WAITED until she heard the door of the clinic close behind Ryan, then leaned her forehead against the cool, smooth wall of the waiting room. His new patient chart still in her arms, she willed away the tears burning behind her eyelids.

She’d expected challenges when she decided to move back to Homestead, with a new career. A new home. A nine-year-old son who considered Central Texas the last place on earth he wanted to live. And a town that held bad memories from her early childhood.

But she certainly hadn’t expected to run into Ryan Gallagher on her second day here.

For years, she’d known he was a Ranger, involved in highly

dangerous operations in the Middle East. Last year, when she'd been back in town for her dad's funeral, she'd overheard someone mention that he was still there, and that he rarely ever showed up in Texas.

There was nothing between them, not anymore. But discovering that he'd been airlifted out of Iraq as a "Critical 4"—on the verge of death—just months ago, had filled her with sadness.

Scanning the grim surgical reports in his medical folder had made her feel worse. His well-muscled, six-foot-two body had suffered multiple, serious injuries that time would never totally heal.

His lean, darkly handsome face was the same. The nearly black hair she'd once loved to touch. The piercing blue eyes and strong masculine jaw.

But the sexy twinkle in his eyes had died, along with his quick wit and his born-and-bred Texas cowboy manners, leaving behind a stranger. A hardened and dangerous soldier, one who'd survived all those years.

With luck, Ryan hadn't seen the sorrow and sympathy in her eyes over all he'd sacrificed in the line of duty, or noticed how his arrival had thrown her off balance.

But no matter what he thought, no matter what she'd once prayed for, there was no going back. She had too much at stake during the next six months to even think about old loves or new beginnings. Cody's future depended on it.

CHAPTER THREE

"SO…WHAT DO YOU THINK of your new place?" Miranda Wright, Homestead's mayor, climbed out of her blue GMC pickup and pulled an overflowing welcome basket from across the seat, then closed the door.

Her dog—some sort of golden Lab mix—hung its head out the window and watched sorrowfully as Miranda flipped her long ponytail over her shoulder and handed the wicker basket to Kristin with a flourish. "Dusty really wanted my mom's Texas Pecan Kisses—there's a dozen of 'em in here—and I swear that dog will do anything for a cookie."

Kristin grinned at her over the huge red bow tied at the top of the handle. "Thanks. Want to come in and see what I've done so far?"

The tall, leggy brunette checked her wristwatch and frowned. "Just a few minutes. I've got to get home, load up and deliver hay to a sheep farmer near Llano by five."

"The guy down at Tanner's grocery tells me you raise the best peaches in the entire area." Kristin shook her head in amazement as she pulled open the yard gate set in the low limestone wall encircling the house and ushered the other woman through. "You must be the busiest person in Loveless County."

Miranda laughed. "I don't handle it all alone. My mother, Nan, takes a very active part, and we usually have at least one family

working for us." She stopped in front of the small two-story house and propped her hands on her hips. "I think this is one of my favorite old houses in this area. A little paint, replace some windows on the ground floor, and this place will be lovely, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do. I already have a lot of plans, for when I have the money and the time." Kristin led the way up onto the wraparound porch and into the front room. "We've just unboxed the living-room things and still need curtains, but it's starting to feel like home."

Just minutes ago she and her son, Cody, had shoved their old leather couch and love seat into position, with the couch facing the fieldstone fireplace and the love seat at a right angle to it, flanked by oak end tables. A lacy white afghan over the back of the love seat covered the worst of the scuffs, and a pile of pillows on the couch covered a couple of old stains.

Miranda brushed a hand across one of the stained glass lamps on the end tables, admiring the deep jewel tones. "These are so pretty. Family heirlooms?"

Kristin felt herself blush. "A consignment store in Austin, I'm afraid. There weren't many things to pass down in my family."

"Lovely all the same." Miranda nodded in approval. "It's great finding treasures like these and being able to save money while you're at it."

She moved over to a wall and peered at the thermostat. "Have you checked the heating system? The water and appliances? We

sent a handyman out here to look at everything before you arrived this week, but I always want to make sure."

"Perfect, far as I can tell." Kristin bit her lip. "I owe you all so much. I never thought I'd be able to afford a place of my own. Not like this one…and especially not in my hometown."

"Life comes full circle, doesn't it?" Miranda smiled kindly. "The town is delighted to welcome young families to the area. The homesteading program is a two-way street, really. We offer people a chance for new beginnings. In turn, we bring in new life for our community and our schools. With your medical skills you'll be a great asset here."

"Can I offer you tea? Coffee? A soda?"

Kristin moved toward the kitchen, but Miranda shook her head. "I have to be going, but don't forget those cookies." She winked. "Best on the planet."

"Thanks so much. I know we'll love them."

"If you catch her at a good moment, my mom might even share her secret recipe." Miranda chuckled. "Is there anything you need before I go—any questions?"

"Not right now, I guess. The contract is pretty straightforward." Kristin hesitated. "I love this isolated setting. The view is incredible, and the peace and quiet is wonderful. Neighbors would be fine, too, though. Will there be any more people coming out this way?"

"Eventually. We've got around twenty-five thousand acres to work with, but we don't want to rush. Finding the right people

is more important to us than just giving it all away." She tapped a fingertip against her lips and thought for a moment. "You and your son are the third family to arrive, but we'll have more arriving nearly every month for a while. Most of the parcels in this area are between twenty and a hundred acres. You share a property line with a remote part of a privately owned ranch, though, so that will help you maintain your privacy."

Kristin grinned. "That's perfect. I promise, I'll meet every stipulation to the letter."

"I'm not sure if you knew, but this place was called Cedar Grove Farm. The man who lived here before raised goats, had a few horses and did a little truck farming—vegetables and peaches, mostly."

From the doorway leading to one of the main-floor bedrooms, Kristin caught a flash of movement. "Cody?"

He dutifully came back around the corner, all gangly nine-year-old shyness, the blush on his fair cheeks nearly matching his bright auburn hair. He held one hand behind his back.

Something to check on as soon as Miranda leaves. "This is Miranda Wright. She's the mayor, and she heads up the committee that brought us here. Can you tell her thanks?"

He ducked his head, avoiding eye contact with either of them, mumbled something that might have been a thank-you, then raced around the corner.

"I'm sorry, he's usually much—"

"No problem." Miranda waved away the apology as she started

out the door. “I’m sure this move has worn him out, and most little guys are shy with strangers, anyway. We’ll meet again soon.”

Kristin leaned a shoulder against the door frame and watched Miranda stride to her truck and drive away, feeling suddenly melancholy.

“New beginnings,” she said softly to herself. “Something I’ve needed for a long, long time.”

Though those new beginnings weren’t going to be entirely smooth. Cody had been acting out a lot more over the past few weeks. And her bank balance was close to zero.

On top of that, some people in town who’d started to welcome her, had stopped when she’d introduced herself. It was as if they’d recognized her, and their smiles had faded.

She’d been just a child when she and her mother had fled this town over twenty years ago, but her father had stayed…and obviously there were still people who remembered the Cantrell name.

And that, she realized with a heavy heart, could make living here more difficult than she’d imagined.

CODY GLARED at the TV in the corner of the living room, wishing he could kick in the snowy haze on the screen and throw the whole thing out the window.

There were a million places they could’ve moved to, but Mom had chosen this one—an old house surrounded by high, rocky hills in the middle of nowhere. A place where exactly one channel came in clearly, but only if a guy stood with a hand on the top of

the TV and thumped it now and then.

What did kids do around here? No sidewalks. No playgrounds, unless you drove all the way into town, and that was a good ten miles. No neighbors with kids and dogs and tree houses.

The only good thing about moving was that he'd gotten out of Mrs. Morgan's class back in Austin. She'd been mean. Always blaming him for the whispering at the back of the class, or for the spitballs thrown at the kids in the front row. He'd had a timeout almost every day, and that totally sucked.

At least his new teacher seemed nice. She smiled a lot, and came over to ask him if he needed help, because she said he'd have to catch up to everyone else. She smelled pretty good, too…. not like Morgan, who must've taken a bath in perfume every morning and had breath worse than Ben's old dog next door.

Cody listened to the thumping and scraping coming from upstairs, where Mom was unpacking more boxes and pushing furniture around, then he went out onto the porch and leaned over to brace his elbows on the railing. Dropping his chin into his hands, he stared out at the hills that seemed to roll on forever, clear over to where the sun was starting to drop lower in the sky.

There were supposed to be big snakes out here. Big, big rattlesnakes, and coyotes and even armadillos—like the ones in his favorite Jan Brett story-book. Maybe there was even a mama armadillo parading through the low cedar bushes and sagebrush right now, followed by a train of little armadillos.

Dad called armadillos "speed bumps" because you always saw

them flattened along the Texas highways, but the possibility of seeing a live one sent Cody off the porch in two big leaps.

With a last glance over his shoulder at the house, he hopped over the low stone wall and jogged past Mom's Tacoma pickup, stopping to survey the possibilities. Where, exactly, did armadillos like to go?

To the right of the house he could see the tops of a big stand of trees growing past the next hill. They were probably those huge, shady old live oaks that Mom was always admiring, because she said they could be hundreds of years old.

Surely, with a hot sun overhead all day—even though it was almost the beginning of September—an armadillo would like a shady place to rest.

Grinning, he broke into a run.

NOT AGAIN. Kristin frantically raced through the house one more time, checking the closet and even beneath the beds.

Since the divorce, Cody had been unpredictable—clinging one minute, rebellious the next. He sometimes hid from her when he was upset, apparently finding some sort of satisfaction in crying quietly by himself and ignoring her pleas to come out.

But this time, she sensed the emptiness of the house. Where could he have gone? The western sky was deepening from lavender into purple and indigo. The sun had set. And already, the chilly night air was settling in.

"Cody!" she called out, searching around the yard for any sign of him. In exasperation, she widened her search to include the

old, empty barn and the small, one-car garage too narrow for her modern vehicle.

The lane leading out to the highway was empty, the powdery caliche limestone revealing only tire tracks. But Cody could've skirted the lane and gone across country on some adventure without regard for the temperature, approach of nightfall or the fact that he had absolutely no knowledge of the area.

And just within the boundaries of her own twenty acres, he could so easily be lost. Running, now, she shouted his name as she searched farther and farther from the house.

Only a distant owl returned her calls.

Her heart pounding, she slowly turned in a full circle, watching for any sort of movement.

Nothing.

With a cry of frustration, she ran back to the house to grab her cell phone and call for help. Did 911 even work out here? Surely there'd be local police, or a county sheriff, and maybe even a dog that tracked.

She lunged up the steps and breathlessly pawed through the packing materials on the kitchen counter until her fingers curled around the familiar shape of her cell phone.

She flipped it open to punch in the numbers, then stared in disbelief at the faint message blinking on the screen.

Low battery.

Her hand at her throat, she slumped against the counter, her lungs raw from the exertion. Then she hunted through the clutter

again until she found her truck keys. Please, God, let me find my little boy!

At a sharp knock at the door she froze. She was a woman alone in an unfamiliar, isolated place…though that barely registered.

I don't have time for this! I've got to find my son.

She took a deep ragged breath, gripped her keys in one hand and hurried to the front window.

A big gray horse stood placidly in her yard, tied to the gate. A horse?

The front door opened with a crash, and Cody's excited voice echoed through the house like a gift direct from God.

"Mom! Mom! I got a ride on a horse! And it was huge, and beautiful and the cowboy said I could ride again if you say it's okay. Mom!"

Overwhelmed with relief, she turned away from the window, still gripping the curtain for support.

Cody barreled into her just as she caught sight of a tall stranger inside her front door, silhouetted against the lamplight of the living room.

"I…I…" She closed her eyes and wrapped Cody in a tight hug until he wiggled free, then took a steadying breath and looked up to the door. "W-who are you?"

The man stepped into a pool of light, and she found herself staring into Ryan Gallagher's eyes.

"How easily you seem to forget," he said coolly. "At least you're consistent."

Cody anxiously tugged at her sleeve. “Please, Mom. He says I can have another ride. Please? You said we’d get horses when we moved, and this one is beautiful. Please, Mom!”

Kristin stared down at him, then shifted her attention back to Ryan. “I don’t understand. Why are you here?”

“You city folks might let your kids run, but you can’t do that here. Not with a child who doesn’t know the area or how to get back home.” His tone was excessively patient, as if he was trying to explain something to a person with limited mental capacity. “Your boy was over a half mile into the Four Aces.”

“I’ve been searching for him everywhere. I just came inside to call for help.”

Ryan glanced at the TV, which was on and inexplicably now coming in clear as a bell. He raised a brow as he turned back to her, clearly imagining that she’d simply been sitting in here watching a rerun of Friends. “If I hadn’t been riding this evening, Cody might’ve kept going in the wrong direction, in a remote pasture that holds several hundred unpredictable mother cows and calves. He could’ve been trampled, or developed hypothermia by later tonight.”

Kristin shuddered. “He is never to leave this property. He knows that.”

“We’ve also got hunting leases on that land. A careless hunter might see a sudden movement and shoot before thinking.” Ryan glanced down at the boy and paused. “Keep him home, and make sure you know where he is.”

His obvious assumption of negligence rankled for a split second, but he was right. She shouldn't have let Cody out of her sight, and she could only feel gratitude and heartfelt relief that Ryan had come to his rescue.

"I can't thank you enough for bringing Cody back," she said quietly. "If there's ever any way I can repay you—"

"Please, Mom," Cody begged. "Can I ride again?"

Kristin gently took his beloved face in her hands. "The answer is no. Absolutely no. You ran off, and you never said a word. You left the yard, which is against the rules, and this nice man had to interrupt his evening to bring you back."

She straightened and pointed to the stairs. "One hour, time-out. Now."

His eyes filled with sudden tears, but he slowly trudged away, his head bowed, looking for all the world like someone headed for death row.

"I'm really sorry for all your trouble," Kristin said, turning back to Ryan. "I promise—"

But he was already gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MOMENT KRISTIN opened the door of her aunt RaeJean's beauty salon, she knew it was a mistake to stop by on a busy Saturday morning…especially with Cody in tow.

"Lord almighty!" RaeJean Barker exclaimed, tossing aside her comb and brush. "Aren't you just as cute as a sack full o' puppies today?"

Cody cringed against Kristin's side and tried to wiggle away, but RaeJean was faster.

She barreled up to him, gave his shoulders an affectionate squeeze, then tapped under his chin with one crimson-tipped fingernail. "And aren't them just the prettiest eyes? Just like your momma's." She winked at him as she pulled a shiny fifty-cent piece out of the pocket of her pink uniform jacket. Flipping it high in the air, she caught it and offered it on her outstretched palm. "You look like a cowboy in need of a Coke."

He stared up at her, his mouth open, and Kristin prayed he wouldn't comment on RaeJean's flamered curls or turquoise eye shadow. She was, undoubtedly, the most colorful person he'd ever seen.

"Can you say thanks?" Kristin prodded.

He mumbled something and dropped his gaze to his Nike runners, his ears pink.

RaeJean beamed her approval as she hiked a thumb toward

the back of the salon. “Minifridge is back there. Or you can go to the vending machine next door, right in front of the saddle shop. They got more flavors, but it’s not near as cold.”

Cody nodded shyly, then shuffled across the room as if he were crossing enemy territory.

No wonder.

Nothing much had changed here since Kristin’s childhood. Fluffy pink curtains hung at the windows, pink flamingo wallpaper still covered the walls. Ornate, gold-framed mirrors topped the two cluttered workstations, matching the heavy gold wall sconces and frames on the pictures of outdated hairstyles.

The explosion of baroque decorations and bawdy femininity, coupled with the sharp scents of bleach and perm chemicals, nearly took Kristin’s own breath away.

She glanced over the row of women settled under the six dryers at the back of the room, who were watching them with avid interest. Women who, when they walked out the door, would be wearing identical, tightly curled helmets reminiscent of the 1960s. Whatever the request, RaeJean always proceeded to do exactly what she thought best, and that was the one style she did for “women of a certain age.”

Which explained, unfortunately, the number of do-it-yourself haircuts in town and the exodus of the well-to-do to the upscale shops in San Antonio.

“Um…maybe Cody and I should stop back later. I thought you’d be closing about now.”

“Lordy, no. Had a full schedule this morning and Carlita didn’t show up—morning sickness, she says.” RaeJean lowered her voice to a stage whisper. “I figure she decided to sleep late and go off for the day with that fool husband of hers. Ain’t two ways about it, that girl is on her last chance at the Snip and Curl.”

“I think,” Kristin murmured, hiding a smile at the reverent tone RaeJean always used for the name of her shop, “that you were saying the same thing when I was in town for my daddy’s funeral going on two years ago.”

Her hands on her ample hips, RaeJean snorted. “Meant it then, and I mean it now.” Behind her, a timer buzzed, but she waved away the sound as if it were an annoying fly and fixed a stern eye on Kristin’s shoulder-length hair. “Now, what can I do for you? You need a cut? Some style?” She reached out and ran a hand through Kristen’s silky, straight strands that had defied a lifetime of effort to add curls, waves and even the tidiness of a smooth chignon. “A good perm and some color would brighten you right up. Need something more lively than just strawberry blond, I think.”

Cody’s eyes widened with obvious fascination as he came back in with a Coke and glanced between RaeJean’s bouffant, Technicolor Big Texas Hair, and Kristin’s own simple style.

“Um…not today. You’re really busy, and I need to run.” When RaeJean’s appraisal didn’t waiver, Kristin took a step back. “And I’m just a wash-and-wear sort of girl. Really.”

RaeJean cocked her head. “Was there something else? You

need help out at that place of yours?" Her face brightened. "I'd be happy to give you some decorating advice. Curtains—wallpaper—you name it."

Cody sidled next to Kristin and tugged anxiously on the back of her shirt, undoubtedly envisioning flamingos and ruffles at their rustic place in the country.

"I think we're set on that score, but thanks for the offer." Behind her, a silver bell tinkled over the door and someone stepped inside. Over her aunt's shoulder, Kristin saw one of the customers impatiently drumming her fingernails on the arm of her dryer chair. "I do need to talk to you, though. I've tried and tried to reach Aunt Nora, but she doesn't answer her phone, and I'm just afraid…" She glanced down at Cody. "Well, I just need to talk to her before she does anything…big."

RaeJean nodded decisively, snagged Kristin's arm and hauled her forward. "Family first, I always say. You two sit here for just a minute. I need to do a fast comb-out, turn off that dryer, and I'll be back." She smiled at the newcomer. "Ruth, just set yourself down and have a cup of coffee. You're a mite early, anyway."

RaeJean bustled away, checked each head of hair under a dryer, and scurried back to the woman sitting in one of the styling chairs.

Kristin hovered at the entryway for a moment.

"C'mon, Mom. Let's go." Cody begged. "The first football practice starts in an hour!"

"And it's just on the edge of town. This won't take long,

I promise." She gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze, then smothered a sigh as she sank into one of the pink plastic chairs in the tiny waiting area. Cody stubbornly stood at the door, his lower lip jutting out and his hands jammed in his pockets.

The diminutive woman at the door strolled to the back of the shop and returned with two cups of coffee, handed one to Kristin and settled her thin frame into a chair in the corner. She tipped her head toward the ledge under the window facing the street. "There's cream and sugar packets over there in the pink basket."

"Thanks. Black is fine."

The woman chuckled. "You might change your mind. RaeJeans's coffee could eat rust off a truck, but leastways it's hot."

Kristen took in her pale skin and faded, silver-streaked blond hair. There was a sharp, observant glint in her eyes as she curved a bony hand around her coffee cup for a quick sip and studied Kristin over the rim. She seemed vaguely familiar, though Kristin couldn't place her.

The woman cocked her head, as if she, too, were trying to remember, then she sat back in her chair with a satisfied smile. "I'm Ruth Holden. My husband is the rector at St. Mark's Episcopal." She pursed her lips. "I'll bet you've come here for the land giveaway."

Kristin laughed. "Good guess."

"I've been on the Home Free Committee since last fall, and we've already had some nice young families move into the area I

think I must've seen your photo in that first batch of applications. In fact, I'll bet you're—" she pursed her lips for a moment, apparently searching her memory "—Kristin and Cody Peters?"

She leaned forward and offered her hand. "My husband had a light stroke last spring and was hospitalized in Austin for several weeks, so I wasn't at your interview."

"I hope he's doing well."

"He's a strong man, determined as can be. He was back in the pulpit within three weeks after coming home." Ruth's voice filled with pride. "For over forty years, nothing has mattered to him more than the moral welfare of his flock."

Until her parent's divorce, Kristin and her mother had gone to a little Methodist church out on Pecan Street, though her father had refused to attend anywhere. She vaguely remembered a childhood friend talking about her hellfire-and-brimstone Episcopal priest. "I'm sure the congregation is very lucky to have him," she murmured.

"Indeed they are." Settling back into her chair, Ruth took another sip of her coffee. "I want you to know how pleased the Committee is to see all of you young folks moving into town. Just this month, we brought in a husband and wife who are teachers, a young fellow with a new degree in nursing, and a family planning to raise goats and sheep on fifty acres west of town. You must be the physician's assistant who'll be running the local health clinic."

Despite occasional visits to Homestead to see her father over the years, the easy familiarity of the small town still caught

Kristin unawares. In Dallas and Austin, she'd barely known her neighbors, and people had rarely stopped to chat.

She nodded. "The land deal is a wonderful opportunity. We're not actually both the Peters, though. Cody kept his father's last name after my divorce, but last summer I finally decided to go back to my maiden name. Cantrell."

"Divorced?" Ruth blinked, her mouth working. She visibly drew back into herself. "But I thought…"

"I'm sure it was clear on my application."

Ruth brought her hand up to her mouth. "A-and you said Cantrell?"

"That's right." Kristin rose and caught Cody's hand. "My dad was Nate Cantrell."

Her brow furrowed, Ruth looked from the boy to Kristin. So it was happening again. That flash of recognition, the moment of prejudgment.

Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to come back here, after all.

"I should have recognized you," Ruth said faintly.

"I was just ten when I left with my mom. When I came to see my dad, he was usually out working on one ranch or another, and we rarely ever made the long trip into town."

"I see. It isn't…I mean…" Her cheeks flushed pink. "It's just…"

Mindful of Cody's heightened interest in the conversation, Kristin gave his hand a quick squeeze. "I think we'd better get

moving, Tiger, so we aren't late for that practice. I'll just try calling RaeJean later."

At the door, she urged him outside, and then turned back toward the flustered woman. "I'm sorry if I've upset you."

"No…I mean, yes…" The color in the older woman's cheeks betrayed her struggle for tact.

"Whatever you may have thought about him, I do know my father had a good heart." Kristin held the woman's gaze. "I'm here because I'm good at what I do, this town needs me, and because I need a new start for my son. My last name should make no difference at all."

Ruth's mouth tightened. "You misunderstand me, dear. The Almighty sits in judgment, not me. But…there are people who still blame your father for how things changed around here. They might not be so ready to forgive."

IT'S GOOD TO HAVE YOU back in Texas, son." Leland Havens clapped Ryan on the shoulder, then winced in sympathy as Ryan flinched. "Sorry. I didn't think. How're you doing, now? Better?"

"Fine." Ignoring the pain radiating down his arm, Ryan took a step back and hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his Levi's.

The years had been kinder to Clint than they'd been to his lifelong friend. Deep creases lined Leland's cheeks, his hair had thinned to a few long wisps on top. His once imposing, elegant frame no longer stood quite as tall. The man had been Ryan's

boyhood mentor, and had once seemed as ageless as the massive live oaks lining the drive. Now, surely in his late sixties, he'd aged beyond his years and his mortality was all too apparent.

"I'm glad you could drop in so soon. I imagine a young buck like you would rather spend a Saturday morning on horseback or out on a golf course, eh?"

He waved Ryan to a chair in the corner of his office, motioned to his secretary from the open doorway, and then sat next to Ryan. "I suppose Garrett hightailed it off to some rodeo for the weekend?"

"He left late Wednesday for Billings." Without so much as a fast hello and goodbye for the eldest brother he'd once followed around like an orphan pup.

Leland eyed Ryan thoughtfully. "Nothing his daddy says gets through to him. He's heading for a full-body cast if he doesn't quit chasin' bulls and gold buckles every weekend."

"And the little buckle bunnies, from what Trevor says. I understand Garrett's been busy leaving a trail of broken hearts from Canada to Houston."

"I keep warning him to be careful. All we need is one avaricious gal who knows the Gallagher name, and the potential for a paternity suit and bad press shoots to the moon."

A valid concern, Ryan supposed. With that deep-dimpled, aw-shucks grin and devilish twinkle in his eye, Garrett had always been a charmer. He'd usually gotten exactly what he wanted while making others feel happy to hand it over.

“At least Trevor is well settled,” Leland continued. “Nice wife, kids.”

“And works his tail off, from what I’ve seen so far.”

Leland took a pair of half reading glasses from the breast pocket of his coat, settled them low on his nose, then studied Ryan over the rim. “He’s a good hands-on manager. He knows cattle, horses, people.”

“But…?” Ryan raised a brow.

“He doesn’t have the skills or the foresight to handle the broader picture. We just need to get past the Nate Cantrell incident, put the ranch affairs back in order and hire a permanent manager.”

“Well, my skills aren’t exactly current, unless Dad needs a sniper with an M4 guarding the ranch.”

A portly secretary dressed in a severe black skirt and jacket marched in with a tray of coffee cups and a small coffeepot. After settling the tray on the end table between them, she bustled out, closing the door firmly behind her.

Leland leaned forward to hand Ryan a cup, then cradled the other one in both hands and smiled at him affectionately. “Your brothers wanted you here, so look at this as a chance to rest up, after all you’ve been through.” He paused. “You’ve given enough of your life to the service. With your business degree, you could head for Chicago or New York, if you want something besides cedars, sand and sagebrush in your backyard.”

“I’m still on active duty. I plan to go back as soon as I can.”

Leland's sympathetic gaze drifted to Ryan's knee as he put his cup down. "Maybe you'd like to, but—"

Ryan struggled to curb his irritation. "After surgeries and rehab, they're even able to return some amputees to the front lines. I'll go back, even if I have to be an instructor."

"Of course, of course." Leland lifted his hands in a placating gesture. "Forgive me."

Ryan winced. Leland had always kept the best interests of the Gallaghers at heart, and he certainly didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of Ryan's unpredictable bitterness. "No…the apology should be mine."

Clasping his hands loosely in his lap, Leland leaned back and gave Ryan a fatherly smile. "That time when you got your first Purple Heart, a few years ago? There was mention of it at a high school graduation assembly. After that, at least five elementary classrooms started sending letters and gift boxes to servicemen in Iraq." He shook his head in wonderment. "Townsfolk filled those collection boxes to overflowing."

Surprised and a little embarrassed, Ryan looked away. "At least some good came out of it. I didn't realize anyone even knew."

Leland laughed. "Then you probably don't remember the Niebauers, who run the Herald. Millicent isn't bigger than a minute, but she's got a nose for news and the tenacity of a bulldog. Though, come to think of it, she didn't get wind of your injuries a few months ago. Just the Purple Heart."

"So how bad are things out at the ranch—really?"

"Really?" He shook his head slowly. "Up until a few years ago, your father watched over both his political career and the ranch with a sharp eye. Nothing got past that man—nothing. Then his vision started failing, but of course being Clint, he never let on. We know Nate got away with at least sixty grand, but the books are such a mess that it could be double that, easily."

"Pretty much what Trevor said…and what I found in the forensic accountant's report."

"Clint may be snarling about your arrival, but I'm sure he's angrier at himself than he is at anyone else. Once he simmers down, he'll be grateful."

"So I'm just supposed to reorganize the bookkeeping system?" Ryan sighed. "That's something a good office manager would do."

"Not with Clint bird-dogging every last step of the way… and it's not just the bookkeeping, either. You could revamp the hunting lease program, and maybe work on marketing angles that will get it moving. I'm not sure but that the quarter horse and beef cattle programs won't need some work, as well." Leland grabbed a legal pad on his desk, ran a forefinger down a list of notes, then set the pad back down. "Whatever you can do while you're here will help the new manager who follows you. I'll assist in any way I can."

"And the missing money?"

"Honestly, it's a lost cause." Leland splayed his fingers on his

thighs. “But if you come across anything—any clues whatsoever—let me know immediately. I’ll get the private investigator on it right away.” Leland studied Ryan over the rim of his glasses again. “The corporation needs that money back, but this situation can’t get out to the press or the sheriff’s office—either way, news will spread. Clint’s political rivals would have a heyday crowing about him ‘allowing’ his own business to end up in such disarray. This next election will likely be his last, and there are still issues that mean a great deal to him.”

“Right.” Ryan shifted in his chair, wishing he’d taken a couple Tylenol before leaving the ranch. “After all this time, the horses are out of the barn, anyway.”

“The loss came at a bad time. Remember the K-Bar-C?”

“The Braxton place. Shares part of our eastern property line.”

“Place went up for auction twelve years ago. A group of locals formed a consortium, bought it and also picked up some smaller properties to create KC Enterprises. Every one of those investors had dreams of making big money. Some of them poured their life savings into the deal, some mortgaged their own property to scrape enough money together.”

The K-Bar-C… “Trevor filled me in on some of this already, and I do know Dad and Braxton weren’t the best of friends,” Ryan mused. “Clyde’s place was upstream on the aquifer that supplies the Four Aces, and I vaguely remember Dad ranting about water rights.”

“Which is why he wanted to buy out Braxton for years. We put

together one offer after another, but Braxton hung on to it until he died in his late 80s—out of sheer spite, Clint figured. The heirs scrabbled over the estate and ultimately ran it into bankruptcy. It came up for auction when I was out East for a couple months and your dad was in the middle of some big tussle in the State Senate. It sold to a group of locals."

"I can imagine how happy he was when he heard the news too late."

"You have no idea," Leland retorted. "Then just a year ago, the consortium folded. Crazy idea anyway, if you ask me. Drought hit. Mad Cow drove cattle prices down. The partners were up to their ears in debt and way behind on taxes."

"So Dad—"

"This time he knew about it. But he was cash poor, especially after so much money was embezzled. He couldn't pull a down payment together quick enough, and the town council foreclosed on the property. They're using it for that homesteader program, bringing in more families to grow the town. Your father is still furious, and he's had nearly a year to adjust."

"Homesteads?"

"At very low-cost loans that mostly just cover the back taxes, with no down payment. If all goes according to plan, there'll be hundreds of families sitting on top of that aquifer, drawing water away." Leland pursed his lips. "The sheriff is on the Home Free committee, along with Frances Haase, the town librarian, Father Holden's wife, mayor Miranda Wright and Enfield."

“Enfield. I can imagine what Dad thinks about that.”

Leland pushed himself to his feet and started to pace. “Local politics are small potatoes to your father, of course, but those two have been rivals since they were kids. He probably thinks the entire land giveaway deal was Arlen’s scheme to irritate him. It wasn’t, though. Miranda came up with the idea and sold everyone else on it.”

“I was out riding yesterday and ran across a boy in our east pasture. I figured his family was just renting the old Cedar Grove place.”

“Nope. You just met your neighbors. Permanent neighbors, that is. There’ll be a lot more coming. And a lot of the property adjoins the Four Aces.”

“The boy was Kris Cantrell’s son.”

Leland’s jaw dropped. “She’s back? Does your father know?”

“That Nate’s daughter is in town? Yes. That she’s a neighbor? I have no idea. I suppose there’s been some sort of notice in the local papers about the homestead awards, but he spends a lot of time in Austin.”

Leland whistled. “Damn.”

“Well, I don’t think she was any happier about seeing me that I was to see her.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw as Leland drummed his fingers on his thigh. “I know you two were close once. She was a pretty little thing, but Clint said she was bad news.”

How much had Dad told him, all those years ago?

“I’m old enough to take care of myself, this time around,” Ryan shot back.

Once burned, twice shy, his mother had said more than once over the years, and she was right.

He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

CHAPTER FIVE

"MOM, LOOK! HORSES!" Cody struggled to lean forward despite the shoulder strap of his seat belt.

"I…see." Shielding her eyes from the noon sun, Kristin parked in front of their house, stepped out of her red Tacoma pickup and stared at a grizzled old Mexican—one who was all-too familiar—unloading a pale buckskin from a battered old horse trailer.

On the other side of the trailer, she could see just the hindquarters of a sorrel standing slant-hipped, its tail flicking lazily.

And sure enough, a wizened figure in dusty boots and an old gray Stetson soon rounded the back of the trailer. "Howdy," she barked as she slammed the trailer gate shut with a resounding clang. "I was fixin' to leave you a note if you didn't show up in time."

"Show up?" Kristin said faintly. "In time?"

Cody took off running and skidded to a stop just a few yards from the horses. "Wow! Are these for us? You really did get me a horse?"

Kristin hurried to catch up, grabbing his shoulder before he got any closer. "Aunt Nora—"

With a dismissive wave, Nora retrieved the horse tied to the other side of the trailer, motioned to Luis, her ranch hand, and, with Kristin and Cody tagging along behind, put the horses into

the corral by the barn.

Cody was clearly thrilled. Kristin felt…stunned.

"Cool! Can we ride now? Which one is mine?" Cody launched himself up onto the split rail fence and hooked his elbows over the top. "Can I have the tan one?"

"Buckskin, son. Boots is a buckskin. I figure you'd best ride Rebel, the sorrel. He's been around the world with kids on his back. No surprises with that'n." Nora tipped her hat back with a forefinger and studied him. Her sun-cured skin baked to a leathery brown after a lifetime outside in the blazing heat of Texas, she was sixty-three but had looked much older than that for the past twenty years. "Did your momma teach you how to ride, yet?"

His eyes veered away from the horses and met Kristin's for just an instant. "Sorta."

Kristin, her head reeling, gathered her thoughts. "I think there's been a mistake. We're not really ready for this, and I'm not sure I can afford—"

"Pshaw!" Nora snorted. "What would your daddy say, you coming back here, clean out in the middle of God's country with your boy, and not putting some horses in your barn? You were on Teacup before you could walk."

Remembering her first ancient, arthritic pony, Kristin couldn't help but smile. "True. But right now, money's tight, and I haven't checked the fencing, and I just don't think—"

"Mo-om!" Cody cried, looking between her and Nora. "She's

gonna let us have 'em. Pleeeaasse?"

Nora leveled a long look at Kristin, then slowly shook her head in disgust. "Bless her heart, RaeJean didn't tell you. I swear she doesn't have the sense God gave a cactus. I figured she'd see you around town, and she was supposed to tell you I was coming over one of these first days."

RaeJean was a little absentminded, but at the thought of causing additional friction between her late father's sisters—who tended to bicker anyway—Kristin scrambled for the right thing to say. "I went to see her yesterday, but she was busy, then we left and I just forgot to call her later. My fault, really. Totally mine."

Nora harrumphed and exchanged glances with Luis. "I suppose…we could take these two horses home."

"Mom, please!" Cody jumped off the fence and ran to grab Kristin's hand. "I'll do the chores. I'll do everything, honest. They won't cost much—there's nice pasture, and we already have the barn."

Kristin held back a sigh. "What's the story on these geldings?"

Luis chuckled. "Your aunt, she did a favor for these fine boys. They belong to this place, but couldn't stay without someone here."

"They belong here?" Mystified, Kristin studied the horses through the rails of the fence. If not registered quarter horses they were certainly the type, with broad, muscular hindquarters and powerful chests.

"Foaled on this very property, ten years ago," Nora said

briskly. “This piece once belonged to an old cowboy who’d saved up enough to retire on a little place of his own.” The note of affection in her voice suggested that they might have been friends…or more. “Jim broke these boys out nice and gentle, rode most every day. Two years ago his heart gave out. Had no relatives, so the sheriff asked if I’d take the horses and his dog. The land was bought out by the K-Bar-C investors.”

“There’s a dog?” Cody scanned the yard. “Did you bring him, too?”

“Ole Scout is probably asleep under the tractor back home. I don’t know that he’s up to any more changes.” Nora pursed her lips, considering. “But if you’re looking for a dog, too—”

“Yes!”

“No,” Kristin said quickly. “Not right now, anyway. And about the horses—I just don’t have the money right now to buy them, much less for the shoer and vet and feed.”

Crossing her arms, Nora looked exasperated. “Missy, you’re getting them for free. You got twenty acres here, with some good grassy bottom ground. They’re both easy keepers, and they’ve been barefoot from day one. You know as well as I do that you can do your own paste worming and vaccinations.”

“I don’t have any friends here. Just think how cool it would be for you and me to go riding, Mom,” Cody pleaded. “Please? I’ll…I’ll do dishes forever. I’ll…I’ll do anything you say.”

A smile played at the corners of Luis’s mouth. “Sounds like your young caballero is in great need of a good horse,” he mused.

“Maybe you could just give this a try. If it don’t work out, we come get the horses. Eh, Nora?”

Nora nodded decisively. “Done.”

“I got my fence pliers in the truck,” Luis added, giving Cody a wink. “You and me can ride the property line right now, make sure the fence is tight.”

“Yes!” Cody pumped his fist and tackled Kristin around the waist. “Thanks, Mom!”

Dazed, she returned his hug, then spread her hands palms up as she met Nora’s amused gaze. “But the tack—I don’t have anything.”

Nora hiked a thumb toward the back of the pickup. “Figured as much. We tossed in a coupla old roping saddles, bridles and some other equipment. It all came from Jim’s barn anyway, so it’s only right it comes back here. I’ve got no need for it.”

Within minutes, the horses were saddled and Cody, trembling with excitement, was aboard Rebel. Tipping his hat, Luis started into the pasture with Cody close behind.

Kristin watched them disappear over the hill, then turned to Nora and gave her a hug. “Thank you. It was really sweet of you to do this.”

Flustered, Nora took an awkward step back. “Needed to do this for my friend Jim,” she said, her voice rough. “Nothing more than that.”

The unexpected hint at a softer side touched Kristin. Nora had always been the loner of the two aunts—a proud, independent

woman who'd managed a ranch on her own since her early twenties. Kristin chose her words carefully. "Of course. I know he'd be thankful for everything you've done. I promise I'll take good care of this place, and his horses, too."

Nora turned away and busied herself with gathering the halters, lead ropes and hoof picks that Luis and Cody had left on the fenders of the trailer. "You be careful, hear? Young woman and a child out here, all alone…"

"I'm not some city slicker afraid of the dark, Aunt Nora. Remember, I spent part of my childhood here. I won't miss the streetlights and traffic."

"It's not just that." Nora inclined her head toward the barn, so Kristin fell in step with her as she headed that way.

Once the tack was stowed, Nora leaned against a stall door with one booted foot cocked back to rest on the rough timber. "I don't know how much you know about your dad." She laughed dryly. "Kids usually aren't aware of everything that's going on, and I expect your momma didn't feel too inclined to share a lot of good memories, eh?"

"True," Kristin admitted. "Though she didn't run him down in front of me. I know they fought a lot more after the foreclosure of our ranch. And after the divorce, I didn't get to see him much." She forced a smile. "I missed him."

"My brother was a good man. A hard worker, and I believe he was as honest as they come. Things never did go right for him, though. Drought and cattle prices foreclosed his ranch.

He scraped and saved, and rallied a lot of friends to join him in a partnership to buy thousands of acres of good Texas Hill Country, back before the prices hiked up so high. People…" Nora paused. "Well, when the consortium went under, there were a lot of people around here who were hurt bad. Some lost their life savings, some lost the family ranches they'd mortgaged to join in. A lot of them blamed your dad, saying he'd talked them into a foolish scheme."

"But it wasn't his fault, right?"

"No. It wasn't the fault of the man who oversaw the day-to-day operation of the place, either. Zeb Ritter worked hard as any man could, and your dad was out there, too, working twelve- to eighteen-hour days for him. The economy and the drought were at fault, but it's easier to take failure when you can pin it on someone."

Maybe that's why her dad hadn't had much time for a young daughter who'd lived so far away. "That's not fair."

"Yeah, well, Zeb committed suicide almost eighteen months ago, and your dad died the month before. Neither one is left to blame, now." Nora's lips thinned. "I wanted you to understand, because there are still some locals with hard feelings."

"I've already run into a few of them."

"There's something else." Nora paced to the side door of the barn and stared out over the dry, rolling landscape with her thumbs hooked in the back pockets of her worn Levi's. "Everyone in these parts knows how that sorry bastard Gallagher

wanted the K-Bar-C land. Power and control is everything to him, and it sticks in his craw that the Home Free committee nabbed it."

Kristin joined her at the doorway. "But what can he do about it?"

"Nothing legal," Nora scoffed. "I just want you to understand what's going on around here, and I want you to be careful."

"I hardly think the man can kick me off my land."

Nora rested a calloused hand on Kristin's arm. "Your dad worked for Clint up until a few weeks before he died. They must've had a big argument, because Nate either quit or was fired. I'll go to my grave thinking there was something fishy about my brother's death so soon after that."

Startled, Kristin drew in a sharp breath. "But it was ruled an accident."

"I have no proof. But your dad drove that road most every day of his life. He knew every curve, every bump. The weather was dry. The sun had just set, so the light was still good. The sheriff doesn't agree with me, but I believe someone forced your dad's truck off the road. And I think I know who it was."

ON TUESDAY MORNING, Kristin's stomach tightened when she checked the time. Eight o'clock. By eight-thirty she felt as if tumbleweed had lodged in her throat.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when the clinic phone rang. It was a wrong number, though in small-town fashion, the caller managed to stretch that inadvertent call into a good ten minutes

about local gossip and the weather.

By a quarter of ten, the waiting room was still empty and Kristin breathed a sigh of relief…until a moment later, when she heard heavy footsteps tromping up the steps and the front door of the clinic squealed open.

Ryan walked in, his face a grim mask. “Sorry we’re late.”

Senator Gallagher followed him, leveled a cold look at Kristen, and folded his arms. “I have a cardiologist in Austin.”

“But you haven’t seen him in almost two years, and he’s over an hour away,” Ryan said evenly. The set of his jaw suggested that the trip into town hadn’t been easy. “You need a local doctor, too.”

“Come on back, Senator. This won’t take long.” Facing the man who’d nearly destroyed her years ago, Kristin dredged up a weak smile. I believe someone forced your dad’s truck off the road—and I think I know who it was. Though Nora had refused to elaborate, it didn’t take much imagination to guess who that someone was she referred to.

When she was younger, Kristin had discovered just how cruel and domineering Clint could be…yet it hardly seemed plausible that an influential senator would jeopardize his privileged status with murder.

“We have some old records from the Dr. Grady days, but I’m sure we’ll need to update your history, sir. We’ll also need a release so we can get copies of your current records in Austin.”

Ryan turned to look out the window of the clinic as Kristin led

his father down the hall to an exam room. Clint took a chair in the corner instead of the edge of the exam table, his face impassive.

His responses to her questions were cursory at best—and likely not entirely accurate, given the stubborn jut of his jaw. Fortunately, he signed a release for the transfer of his medical records in Austin. While he was disrobing, she faxed it to the cardiology clinic and then called them to ask if the records could be faxed back ASAP.

Back in the exam room, she found Clint sitting on the exam table, his shirt off. He sat in silence as she took his blood pressure both sitting and standing, then listened to his heart and lungs. "You said you weren't on any medications. Is that correct?"

His mouth tightened. "Nothing I need to take."

"I'm hearing some PVCs—an irregular beat. I'd like to do an EKG while you're here." When he bristled, she added, "It's apparently been a while since you've been to a doctor, so it's good to have a baseline."

"Who reads it, you?"

His derisive tone rankled. "Yes, and then I'll send it on to Dr. Hernandez and the cardiologist in San Antonio."

She rolled the EKG machine from its place in the corner and attached the leads, then ran a tape on him, watching the needle trace a telltale pattern that confirmed her initial diagnosis.

He apparently noticed something in her expression, because his eyebrows drew together. "Normal, I suppose."

"Not entirely," she hedged. "Though in a man your age we

can hardly expect a twenty-year-old heart, right? We'll have a report back from the cardiologist by tomorrow, and we should have your old records by then, too."

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