Desire™

YOUR RANCH... OR MINE?

Kathie DeNosky

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Аннотация

Know when to hold ’em… One winning hand of poker and the Lucky Ace ranch was his—half his, at least. The only thing standing in the way of Lane Donaldson making it his permanent home is the ranch’s other owner. Taylor Scott sure is something fine to look at, but she’s adamant about running the ranch herself. And then she moves in—with him! So Lane challenges Taylor to another game of poker for the ultimate prize—winner takes all. But who’s to say they can’t have a little fun while they wait for fate to deal their hand….

Содержание

“Sleep well, Taylor.” 5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 52

“Sleep well, Taylor.”

When Lane slowly released her and took a step back, it took a moment for her to realize he was looking at her expectantly. “Um … good night … Lane,” she finally managed.

Forcing herself to move, she opened the screen door and didn’t stop until she was upstairs with her bedroom door shut firmly behind her. As she leaned back against it, she had to remind herself to breathe. Lane had more raw sensuality in his little finger than most men had in their entire bodies.

Her heart suddenly began to pound against her ribs. When had she started thinking of him by his first name? It had been much easier and a lot less personal to keep him compartmentalized as Donaldson, her adversary—the very man who stood between her and her goal of owning all of the Lucky Ace.

* * *

Your Ranch … Or Mine? is part of The Good, the Bad and the Texan series: Running with these billionaires will be one wild ride.

Your Ranch…

Or Mine?

Kathie DeNosky

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KATHIE DENOSKY lives in her native southern Illinois on the land her family settled in 1839. She writes highly sensual stories with a generous amount of humor; her books have appeared on the *USA TODAY* bestseller list and received numerous awards, including two National Reader's Choice Awards. Kathie enjoys going to rodeos, traveling to research settings for her books and listening to country music. Readers may contact her by e-mailing kathie@kathiedenosky.com. They can also visit her website, www.kathiedenosky.com, or find her on Facebook, www.facebook.com/Kathie-DeNosky-Author/278166445536145.

This book is dedicated to my poker playing friends Chris Doss, Jeremy Miller and Michele Hudson. Over the years I've had a ton of fun playing poker with you and hope we get to play again soon.

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One

Lane Donaldson couldn't help but laugh as he watched the five men he called brothers acting like a bunch of damned fools.

It was funny how a baby could do that to otherwise intelligent grown men. And whether he wanted to admit it or not, he was no different. He had done his fair share of making faces and odd noises to try to get a smile out of the kid, as well.

He had invited his family and friends to the barbecue to celebrate his winning half of the Lucky Ace Ranch in a poker game last fall. But because of the birth of his nephew a few months back, the celebration had turned into a party to welcome the new baby to the family as well as to commemorate his big win.

"Y'all are going to scare the pudding out of little Hank," Nate Rafferty complained as he made another face at the infant in his brother Sam's arms.

Nate and Sam were as different as night and day, even though they were the only two biological siblings out of the band of foster brothers who had spent their adolescence together on the Last Chance Ranch. While Sam was happily married with a three-month-old son, Nate was too busy trying to date the entire female population of the southwest to settle down. In fact, of the four remaining confirmed bachelors, Lane included, Nate was hands down the wildest of the bunch.

"And I suppose you think you're not scaring the kid with that sappy grin of yours, Nate?" Ryder McClain asked, laughing. "I play chicken with two thousand pounds of pissed-off beef every weekend and you're still enough to scare the hell out of me." A rodeo bull fighter, Ryder was without question one of the bravest men Lane had ever had the privilege of knowing—and Ryder was also the most laid-back, easygoing of his foster brothers.

"How much longer before you become a daddy, Ryder?" T. J. Malloy asked, taking a swig from the beer bottle in his hand. A highly successful saddle bronc rider, T.J. had retired at the ripe old age of twenty-eight and in the ensuing years had started raising and training champion reining horses.

"The doctor told us the other day that it could be just about any time," Ryder answered, glancing uneasily over to where his wife, Summer, sat talking to Sam's wife, Bria, and Bria's sister, Mariah. "And the closer it gets, the more I feel like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

"Getting a little nervous, are you?" Lane asked, grinning.

“More like a lot,” Ryder said, glancing again at his wife as if to assure himself she was still doing all right.

“I know exactly how you feel, Ryder,” Sam said, nodding. “About a month before Bria had little Hank, I mapped out the quickest route to the hospital and made several practice runs just to be sure I could get her there in time.”

“Both of you have helped cows during calving season for years,” Nate said, his tone practical. “If you’d had to, you could have delivered little Hank, Sam. And you could deliver your and Summer’s baby, Ryder.”

Every one of them gave Nate an unimpressed look, then, shaking their heads, resumed their conversation.

“What?” Nate asked, obviously confused.

“I want the best for my wife when the time comes for her to have our baby and I’m man enough to admit I’m not it,” Ryder answered, his disgusted expression stating louder than words what he thought of Nate’s logic.

“Have you given in and asked the doctor if the baby is a boy or a girl, Ryder?” Jaron Lambert asked, staring across the yard at the women.

“We really don’t care as long as the baby is healthy and Summer is okay,” Ryder answered, shaking his head. “She wants to be surprised and I want whatever she wants.”

“Well, I hope it’s a girl,” Jaron said flatly.

Lane couldn’t help but chuckle. “Mariah still not talking to you, bro?”

Jaron shook his head. “She’s still pissed off about what I said when Sam and Bria told us they were having a boy.”

Jaron and Mariah had been arguing from the time they learned that Bria and Sam were expecting. Jaron had been sure the baby would be a boy, while Mariah had insisted it would be a girl. Apparently, Mariah had taken exception to Jaron’s gloating after he’d been proven right.

“Yeah, women don’t like it very much when a man says ‘I told you so,’” Lane said, grinning.

“You think, Dr. Freud? I figured that out all by myself right after she stopped talking to me, genius.” Jaron’s sour expression and reference to Lane’s psychology degree caused Lane to laugh out loud.

“When are you going to stop beating around the bush and take that girl out for a night on the town?” Lane asked.

“I’ve told y’all before, I’m too old for her,” Jaron answered sullenly.

“That’s bull and we all know it,” T.J. shot back. “She’s only eight years younger than you. It might have mattered when you were twenty-six and she was eighteen, but she’s in her mid-twenties now. Your ages aren’t that big a deal anymore.”

“Yeah, and it’s not like she wouldn’t go,” Ryder added. “She’s had a crush on you from the time she met you. Although I can’t for the life of me figure out why.”

Taking a sudden interest in the tops of his boots, Jaron shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve got a world championship to

win and I don't need the distraction." Competing in bull riding and bareback events, Jaron was a top contender to win the All-Around Rodeo Cowboy Championship for the third year in a row.

"While you guys try to talk some sense into Jaron, I see a lady who looks like she could use a trip around the dance floor," Nate said, grinning. "And I can't think of a man here who is better at doing the Texas two-step than me."

When they all turned to see which woman Nate was talking about, Lane felt as if he had taken a sucker punch to the gut. A little above average in height, the leggy redhead in question wasn't just pretty, she was absolutely breathtaking. Her long, straight, copper-colored hair complimented her creamy complexion to perfection and he couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to run his fingers through the silky strands.

"Who is that?" T.J. asked, sounding as awestruck as Lane felt.

"I've never seen her before," Lane answered, looking around. It didn't appear she was with any of the other guests.

"She had to have just arrived," Nate added, sounding quite certain of the fact. "Otherwise, I would have noticed her before now."

As Nate started across the yard toward the woman, Lane couldn't say he was sorry she had decided to crash the barbecue he was throwing to celebrate winning half of the Lucky Ace Ranch. He would have thrown the party when he first became a partner in the place, but it had been so late in the fall he had

decided to wait until spring, when it was warmer and they could celebrate Texas style—with an outdoor barbecue and dance. And now he was glad that he had. She was without question one of the prettiest women he'd ever seen and a welcome addition to the view in his ranch yard.

Lane frowned at the uncharacteristic stab of envy coursing through him as he watched Nate introduce himself to her, then take her in his arms to move around the temporary dance floor Lane's hired hands had installed for the festivities. He'd never been envious of any of his brothers before, but there was no denying that was exactly what was wrong with him at the moment.

When the country band took a break, Lane watched Nate talk with the woman for a moment before he shrugged and sauntered back to the group. The woman glanced at him and his brothers standing on the opposite side of the dance floor, then walked over to the refreshment table.

"It doesn't look like that went exactly the way you planned, Nate," T.J. said, laughing.

Looking as if he couldn't quite believe what had happened, Nate shook his head. "I must be losing my touch."

"Why do you say that?" Sam grinned. "Has she heard about your love-'em-and-leave-'em reputation?"

"No, smart-ass." Nate gave Sam a dark scowl before turning his attention to Lane. "All she did was ask me questions about you."

“Me?” It was the last thing Lane had expected to hear. Why would she be inquiring about him? “What did she want to know?”

Nate shrugged. “She mainly wanted to know how long you’ve lived on the Lucky Ace and if you intend to stay here or sell out and move on.” He frowned and glanced over his shoulder at the woman. “She didn’t even know which one of us you were. I had to point you out.”

Lane was more bewildered than ever as he stared across the yard at the woman surveying the array of food the caterer had prepared for his guests. He supposed she might have been in the gallery at one of the high-stakes poker tournaments he’d played over the years. But he rejected that idea immediately. If she had, she wouldn’t have needed Nate to identify him.

“Looks like you might have an admirer, Lane,” Ryder said, grinning like a six-year-old kid turned loose in a toy store.

“I doubt it,” Lane answered, shaking his head as he stared across the yard at the woman. “If that was the case, she wouldn’t have had to ask Nate about me.”

His brothers all nodded their agreement as they continued to stare at her.

Deciding that he could speculate all evening and still not come up with any firm answers as to why the woman would be so curious about him, Lane took a deep breath. “No sense in standing here wondering about it. I’m going to ask her.”

“Good luck with that,” Jaron said.

“If you strike out like Nate, let me know and I’ll give my luck

a try," T.J. added, laughing.

Ignoring his brothers' teasing comments, Lane crossed the dance floor to the opposite side of the yard, where the woman had seated herself at an empty table. "Mind if I join you?" he asked as he pulled out a chair and started to sit down. "I'm—"

"I know who you are. You're Donaldson." She was silent for a moment, then, without looking up from her plate, shook her head. "You might as well join me. It wouldn't do me a lot of good if I told you that I did mind."

Her cool tone, obvious hostility and refusal to look directly at him caused him to hesitate. He was almost certain they had never met. What could he have possibly done to offend her? And why had she crashed his party just to give him the cold shoulder?

"Forgive me for not being able to recall, but have we met before?" he asked, determined to find out what was going on.

"No."

"Then why the chilly reception?" he asked point-blank as he pushed the chair back under the table without sitting down. He had no intention of sitting beside her when it was obvious she didn't want his company. But for the life of him, he couldn't figure out the reason for her attitude toward him.

"I'm here to discuss something with you and I'd rather not get into it in front of your guests," she said, pushing the food around on the plate in front of her with her fork. When she finally looked up at him, her emerald-green eyes sparkled with anger. "We'll talk after the party is over."

Lane studied her delicate features as he tried to get a read on what she might be up to. She had never met him before. She'd shown up to his party uninvited, and she was extremely angry with him. Now she was refusing to tell him why?

He had no idea what her agenda was, but it was more than a little apparent she had one. He had every intention of finding out what was going on, but she was right about one thing. Getting to the bottom of things would have to wait until the party started winding down. He wasn't about to ruin the rest of his guests' good time by getting into an argument with her now. And there was no doubt in his mind that an argument was exactly what was going to happen.

Nodding toward her plate, he gave her what he hoped, considering the circumstances, was a congenial enough smile. "I'll let you get back to your meal and I'll see you after the party."

As he turned to walk away, Lane checked his watch. Being a professional poker player for the past ten years, he'd long ago learned the fine art of patience. But it was sure as hell failing him now. He suddenly couldn't wait for the party to end so he could find out who the woman was and what she wanted. Then he'd send her on her way.

* * *

As Taylor Scott waited for the last of the guests to leave the barbecue, she gathered her anger around her like a protective cloak and reminded herself she was on a mission. Donaldson was a scheming, cheating snake in jeans. Villains in the old Western

movies her grandfather used to watch always wore black hats and, quite appropriately, Donaldson's wide-brimmed Resistol was as black as his heart. But the one thing she hadn't counted on was how darned good-looking he would be.

Watching him bid farewell to an extremely pregnant woman and her husband, Taylor couldn't help but notice how tall he was, how physically fit. From his impossibly wide shoulders to his trim waist, long, muscular legs and big, booted feet, he had the body of a man who spent his days doing manual labor. Not the look she'd expected of someone who sat for endless hours at a poker table. But what had really thrown her off guard was the warmth and sincerity she'd detected in his chocolate-brown eyes. Framed with lashes as black as his hair, they were the kind of eyes a woman could feel safe getting lost in.

Taylor gave herself a mental shake. Donaldson might be Mr. Tall, Dark and Drop-Dead Gorgeous, but he wasn't a man who could be trusted any farther than she could pick him up and throw him. He was a con man, a swindler—a conniving thief. There was no way he could have won half of the Lucky Ace Ranch in a card game with her grandfather if he hadn't cheated. For over sixty years her grandfather had been considered one of the best players in the world of high-stakes professional poker, and he would never have risked any part of his ranch if he hadn't been certain he could beat the man.

"Let's go inside," Donaldson said when he reached the table where she was sitting.

"Why?"

She hadn't been inside her grandfather's home in several years and she worried her emotions would get the better of her when she walked into the house without him being there. That was something she would rather die than allow Donaldson to see.

He pointed to the catering staff as they cleaned up. "I thought my office might be a little more private." He shrugged. "But it's up to you how much privacy you think we need."

Grinding her back teeth over the fact that he'd called her grandfather's office his, Taylor pushed her chair back. She could deal with her feelings later—after she'd ousted the interloper.

"The office is fine," she said, rising to her feet. "I doubt that you'll want anyone to hear what I have to say anyway."

He stared at her for several long seconds before he nodded and stepped back so she could lead the way across the yard.

Taylor felt his gaze on her back as she walked up the steps and crossed the porch, but she ignored the little shiver of awareness that streaked up her spine. She had come to Texas for one reason. She was going to confront the man who had stolen part of her grandfather's ranch, buy it back, then take great pleasure in ordering him off the property.

But when she entered the kitchen, she forgot all about Donaldson and his disturbing gaze as emotion threatened to swamp her. Being in her grandfather's ranch house, knowing that he wasn't there and never would be again, was almost more than she could bear.

“The office is just down the hall and to your...”

“I know where it is,” she snapped, cutting him off. To have a rank stranger try to direct her through a house that held the happiest memories of her childhood irritated her as little else could.

Her heart ached with unshed tears when she walked into her grandfather’s office. How could everything look the same and yet be entirely different from the last time she was here?

“Please have a seat, Ms....”

“My name is Taylor Scott,” she answered automatically.

Nodding, Donaldson motioned toward one of the two big leather armchairs in front of the desk. “Would you like something to drink, Taylor?”

The sound of his deep baritone saying her name caused an interesting little flutter in the pit of her stomach. She took a deep breath to regain her equilibrium and lowered herself onto the chair. “N-no, thank you.”

He placed his hat on the credenza, then walked around the desk to sit in the high-backed chair. “What is it that you wanted to discuss with me?”

Maybe if she waited to reveal her identity she could get him to incriminate himself as having cheated her grandfather. “I’d like to know what you intend to do with your interest in the Lucky Ace,” she stated, meeting his dark brown gaze head on.

She wasn’t surprised when his expression remained unreadable. After all, he was a professional poker player and well

practiced at keeping his emotions concealed.

"I'm not in the habit of discussing something of this nature with a stranger," he said as if choosing his words carefully.

"I understand you won half of the ranch from Ben Cunningham." When he nodded, she went on. "I'm here to make you an offer for your share."

He slowly shook his head. "It's not for sale."

"Are you sure, Donaldson? The offer I'm willing to make is quite generous."

"Please, call me Lane," he said, giving her a smile that caused her heart to skip a beat. Several of Hollywood's leading men were among her clients. They'd spent thousands of dollars on dental and cosmetic surgery and still couldn't come close to having his perfect smile.

Giving herself a mental shake, she decided to focus on the fact that he was a swindler and ignore his good looks, as well as his request to call him by his first name. That was more personal than she cared to get with the man.

"I'm prepared to pay you well above market value if you can vacate the property within a week," she pressed.

"I'm quite happy here, and even if I weren't, I wouldn't consider selling my share of the Lucky Ace without consulting my partner first, and he's currently in California." He silently stared at her, as if analyzing the situation, before he spoke again. "Why do you think you want my share of the ranch?"

"I don't think I want the ranch. I know I want it," she said

impatiently.

"Why?" he demanded. She could tell she was getting to him when he sat forward, showing the first signs that he was becoming irritated with the situation.

Confident that she was gaining the upper hand, she couldn't help but smile. "Before we get into that, could I ask you a couple of questions, Donaldson?"

He stared at her for a moment before he answered. "You can ask, but I'm not guaranteeing that I'll give you the answers you want to hear."

"How did you manage to get Ben Cunningham to wager any part of this ranch in that poker game last fall?" she queried.

"Why do you think it was my idea that he use the Lucky Ace to cover his bet?" he asked, slowly leaning back in the desk chair.

"Are you saying he voluntarily put it up?" she shot back.

"Why do you think otherwise, Taylor?" he asked, sounding irritatingly calm.

She had heard that he was a licensed psychologist, and it seemed that the rumor was true. Instead of answers, he followed every one of her questions with one of his own—like any good therapist would do. Taylor decided right then and there that if he asked her how she felt about the situation, she was going to reach across the desk and bop him a good one.

"I happen to know that he wouldn't have wagered the ranch unless he was certain he had the winning hand," she stated flatly.

"So you know Mr. Cunningham?" he asked, his expression

still as bland as dry toast.

"Yes, I know him quite well. But we'll get to that later." She was getting nowhere fast and it infuriated her no end that Donaldson remained calm and collected when she was filled with nothing but frustration and anger. She was ready for a verbal battle, but he wasn't taking the bait. "What I'd like to know is why you're living here in his house."

"That's none of your business, Ms. Scott." Addressing her in a more formal way was the only outward indication he was losing patience.

"You've won several of the larger poker tournaments and I would think that with your wealth you would prefer something a bit more urban than a ranch house in the middle of nowhere," she said, hoping he would give her an indication of why he had taken up residence in her grandfather's home.

"Nice try, Taylor." To her surprise, a slow smile curved his mouth. "Now, why don't we start over and you tell me what you've been dancing around since we came in here?"

Deciding that he wasn't going to divulge anything without her telling him who she was, she took a deep breath. "I'm Ben Cunningham's granddaughter and I want to know how you got him to bet half of the ranch in that poker game, why you're staying here and what it will take to get you to sell your interest and get off the Lucky Ace for good."

"Since you're here grilling me, I take it that Ben hasn't supplied you with the answers to your questions?" he asked,

raising one black eyebrow.

"No."

"I'm sure he has his reasons for not telling you, and I'm not going to betray his trust." He shook his head. "But I can tell you that he suggested I move into the house to watch over the place while he was in California visiting with you and your parents."

"What about getting him to bet half of the ranch?" she demanded, not at all satisfied with his unwillingness to tell her what she wanted to know. "How did you manage that?"

"I had nothing to do with him putting up any part of the ranch. It was his idea and his alone," Donaldson answered.

"I have a hard time believing that, Donaldson." Unable to sit still any longer, Taylor rose to her feet to pace back and forth in front of the desk. "He bought this land sixty years ago with his first poker winnings. It was his pride and joy and when he and my grandmother married, they built this house and raised my mother here. In all that time, he never once considered risking any part of it. Why would he suddenly change his mind last fall?"

"You'll have to ask Ben." He smiled. "I haven't heard from him in a couple of months. How is your grandfather? Is he enjoying his time in sunny California? Has he mentioned when he'll be coming back to the ranch?"

Taylor stopped pacing and turned to face him. Her eyes burning with tears she refused to allow her nemesis to see, she took a deep, steadying breath. "Grandpa passed away about three weeks ago."

Donaldson's smile immediately disappeared. "I'm really sorry to hear that. Ben was a good man and the best poker player I've ever had the privilege to know. You have my deepest sympathy."

"T-thank you," she said, sinking into the armchair. Talking about her grandfather, knowing he was gone and that she had been powerless to stop the inevitable, was overwhelming.

"Here, drink this," he said, handing her a glass tumbler as he lowered himself into the armchair beside her.

Lost in her misery, she hadn't been aware that he'd risen from the chair behind the desk. "What is it?" she asked, looking at the clear liquid in the glass.

He gave her a sympathetic smile. "It's just water."

"Oh."

"How did Ben die?" he asked softly.

"He had a massive heart attack," she said woodenly. "He'd apparently known about his heart condition for quite some time, but didn't tell anyone. When I learned about it, I insisted that he see the top cardiologist in Los Angeles. But it was too late. He went into cardiac arrest the day before he was scheduled for open-heart surgery."

They sat in silence for some time before he commented. "I wonder why the poker federation failed to announce Ben's passing last week at the tournament in Vegas?"

Finishing the glass of water, she placed the tumbler on the desk. "It wasn't announced because they don't know about it. He asked that his death be kept quiet until after his ashes were

scattered here at the ranch."

"Is that why you're here now?" he asked. "To tell me you're going to scatter Ben's ashes?"

"No." She determinedly met his questioning gaze. "I took care of his request yesterday evening at sunset."

He looked doubtful. "If you were here yesterday, why didn't I see you?"

"Because I know this place like the back of my hand," she answered. "There's a road two miles west of here that leads to the creek on the southern part of the ranch. Grandpa told me that if something happened to him he wanted his ashes released at sunset down by the creek where he asked my grandmother to marry him." She stared at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. "I'm sure you can understand that it was a private moment for me."

"Of course," he said quietly.

Suddenly feeling drained of energy, she hid a yawn behind her hand. "Now that you know about my grandfather's death, there's no reason not to answer my questions." She gave him a pointed look. "Besides, I inherited the other half of the Lucky Ace Ranch and as the co-owner, that gives me the right to know everything. And the first thing I intend to find out is how you managed to swindle my grandfather."

Two

Lane stared at Taylor for several long seconds as he worked to control his anger. He was still trying to come to terms with losing

a good friend, as well as his partner in the ranch. The last thing he wanted was to be defending his integrity. But it appeared that was exactly what he was going to have to do.

"Before this goes any farther, let me set you straight, Ms. Scott," he said, wondering how he could still find her attractive when he was angry enough to bite nails in two. "I have never been a cardsharp, nor will I ever be. I take my poker games very seriously and I can guarantee you that I don't have to cheat to win. I pit my skill against other players' and I'm good enough to be quite successful at it—just as your grandfather was."

"But he had more years of experience than you are old," she insisted. "How could you possibly beat him unless the game was rigged?"

"I know this is probably hard for you to believe, but your grandfather and I had a lot in common," he stated. "We had a mutual respect for the game and for each other as worthy opponents. I'm sorry if you can't accept that I had the skill to beat your grandfather, but I wouldn't cheat at cards any more than Ben would have."

Suddenly needing a drink, he rose to his feet, walked over to the credenza and poured himself a shot of bourbon. Downing the amber liquid in one gulp, he let the warmth spread throughout his chest before he turned to face her.

"The day I won an interest in this ranch, I had the better hand." He shook his head. "We could have played another day and he might have come out the winner. That's the game and a chance

you take any time you sit down at a poker table."

"I realize that there's always a risk of losing," she said, sounding a little less confident. She hid another yawn behind her delicate hand then continued, "But my grandfather was arguably the best poker player in modern history. He could tell at a glance what his odds of winning were and how much he could safely wager. He would have never bet half of the ranch if he hadn't been certain he would win."

"And because of his miscalculation that makes me guilty of cheating?" Lane demanded.

She yawned yet again. "He wouldn't have risked—"

"I think we've adequately covered that already," he interrupted. He took a deep breath in an effort to cool the fury burning in his gut. She wasn't listening and he was tired of beating his head against a brick wall trying to convince her of his innocence. "Look, it's past midnight and we're getting nowhere. Let's put this discussion on hold until tomorrow morning."

She stared at him for a moment before she finally nodded and rose to her feet. "That would probably be best."

"Where are you staying?" he asked. "I'll drive you to your hotel."

Looking suspicious, she asked, "Why?"

"You're too tired to be behind the wheel of a car," he stated flatly.

"I'm staying right here," she said, her stubborn tone indicating that hell would freeze over before she budged on the issue.

Resigned, he followed her out into the hall.

"I'm assuming that you have a bedroom you used when you visited your grandfather?"

"My room is the one with the lavender ruffled curtains and bedspread at the opposite end of the hall from the master suite," she answered. She started toward the kitchen. "I'll just get my overnight bag from the car."

"Give me your keys and I'll get it for you," he said, holding out his hand.

Even though she had made him angry enough to want to forget his manners, he couldn't ignore the code of conduct his foster father had taught him and his brothers about how a man was supposed to treat a woman. When a woman had something that needed to be carried, a man stepped forward and took care of it for her—no matter how small or lightweight the object was. No excuses.

"I can get it," she insisted, taking a set of keys from the front pocket of her jeans.

He took them from her and tried to ignore the tingling sensation that streaked up his arm when he brushed her fingers with his. "You're tired and it's probably heavy," he said through gritted teeth. "Go on upstairs and I'll leave it outside your door."

"It's the blue backpack on the front passenger seat," she called after him as he left the house. She said something else, but instead of turning back to ask what it was, he continued on to the little red sports car parked by his truck.

At the moment, it was better to put a little distance between them. If he didn't, he couldn't be certain he wouldn't lose his temper and tell her what he thought of her and her ridiculous accusations—or grab her and kiss her until they both forgot that she was a lady and he was trying to be a gentleman.

He stopped short. Where had that thought come from? He would just as soon cozy up to a pissed-off wildcat than to get up close and personal with Taylor Scott. She might be one of the hottest women he'd seen in all of his thirty-four years, but she represented the kind of trouble that a man just didn't need.

Shaking his head at his own foolishness, he unlocked the Lexus and reached inside to get Taylor's backpack. The light, clean scent of her perfume assailed his senses and reminded him of just how long it had been since he'd lost himself in the charms of a willing woman. The scent only added an unwelcome element to the level of his frustration and he cussed a blue streak when his lower body began to tighten. And it didn't help matters one damned bit knowing she would be sleeping in the room directly across the hall from the one he had been using since moving to the ranch six months ago.

He clenched his teeth as another wave of heat surged through his body. How could he possibly feel this level of desire for a woman when she irritated the living hell out of him? For that matter, how had she managed to make him forget everything he'd learned in seven years of studying to become a psychologist?

He had known immediately that she was fishing for

information and he'd successfully evaded answering her by turning the tables and asking questions of his own. He'd even found her interrogation mildly amusing. But what he couldn't quite come to terms with was the fact that when she'd started making accusations, he had let her get to him.

Lane had played poker with men who made it a point of talking smack in an effort to throw him off his game, and not once had he ever let any of it affect him. For one thing, he recognized the insults as a psychological ploy and simply tuned the men out. And for another thing, they all had better sense than to cross the line and accuse him of cheating. But when Taylor made it clear that she thought he had swindled her grandfather out of his ranch, she had unknowingly touched on one of his hot buttons and he'd damned near gone off like a Roman candle in a Fourth of July fireworks display.

He was a psychologist specializing in human behavior. He had been schooled not only in how to be a patient and observant listener but also how to keep his emotions in check. The last thing a client wanted to see from his therapist during a session was a judgmental expression or outright shock when they revealed some of their darkest secrets. Those psychology tools had served him well over the years and he had used them quite successfully as a professional poker player to keep from alerting his opponents to the cards he had been dealt.

But when it came to Taylor, it was as if his skills didn't even exist. All she had to do was look at him with those big green eyes

of hers and his training seemed to go right out the window.

The first time he'd noticed his uncharacteristic reaction to her had been when she told him that she wanted the other half of the ranch. She'd looked him square in the eye and the passion and determination in her striking green gaze had sent a streak of heat straight to the region south of his belt buckle. He had even found himself wondering if she would be that passionate when he made love to her.

His body tightened to an almost painful state and he rattled off every curse word he could think of. He forcefully slammed the car door and locked it with the remote. As he walked back to the house, he glanced down at the small bag in his hand. She couldn't have put much more than a few changes of clothes in it, indicating that she wouldn't be staying more than a night or two. That suited him just fine.

The sooner she went back to California and left him alone, the better. Then maybe he could figure out what the hell had gotten into him and what he was going to do to get rid of it.

* * *

Well before dawn, Taylor rolled over in bed and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. She hadn't been able to sleep more than a couple of hours and those had been filled with fitful dreams of the tall, dark-haired man sleeping in the bedroom directly across the hall from hers.

Deciding she couldn't stand another minute of tossing and turning, she sighed heavily, threw back the covers and sat up on

the side of the bed. How was she going to get Donaldson to sell her his interest in the ranch and leave the Lucky Ace for good? And why on earth did she find him so darned attractive?

She still wasn't entirely convinced that he hadn't somehow managed to cheat her grandfather in that poker game. But Donaldson had presented a compelling argument for his innocence and even though she knew how good her grandfather was at the game, she was starting to have her doubts. After all, he was human and as much as she hated to admit it, he could very well have made a mistake when he mentally calculated his odds of winning that fateful hand.

But what disturbed her the most about Donaldson was her reaction to him. The moment he'd approached her at the party to introduce himself, she had caught her breath, and she wasn't entirely certain she had breathed normally since. She had never experienced that kind of reaction to any of the men she'd dated in the past, let alone one she had just met and didn't trust.

Exhausted from the emotional roller coaster she had been on for the past three weeks and unsettled by her reaction to the man across the hall, she decided to do the one thing that always helped her put things in perspective. After a quick shower, she was going to start cooking.

Twenty minutes later, Taylor tied her damp hair back in a ponytail as she walked into the spacious kitchen. After washing her hands and starting the coffeemaker, she prepared to get to work. Checking the pantry and refrigerator for available

ingredients, she decided on what she would make for breakfast then reached into one of the cabinets for a set of mixing bowls.

"Do you mind if I get myself a cup of coffee?" a deep male voice asked from close behind her.

Jumping, she almost dropped the bowls she held as she spun around to face Donaldson. Her heart racing, she took a deep breath. "I think you just took ten years off my life."

"Sorry," he said, hanging his hat on a peg by the door before pouring himself a mug of coffee. "I didn't mean to scare you. I thought you heard me." His deep chuckle sent a wave of goose bumps shimmering over her skin. "It's kind of hard not to make noise in a pair of boots on a hardwood floor."

Her heart skipped a beat as her gaze traveled the length of him, down to his scuffed cowboy boots. No man had a right to look that good so early in the morning.

Last night at the party, she had thought he was extremely handsome in his dark blue jeans, white oxford-cloth shirt and expensive caiman-leather boots. But that was nothing compared to the way he looked now. Wearing well-worn jeans and a chambray work shirt, he was downright devastating. With his dark eyes, black hair and a fashionable day's growth of beard stubble, Donaldson had that bad boy appeal about him that was sure to send shivers up the spine of any woman with a pulse.

Disgusted with herself and her wayward thoughts, Taylor set the metal mixing bowls on the counter and reached for a carton of eggs. "Where's my grandfather's housekeeper?"

“Marie retired right after the first of the year and I just haven’t gotten around to hiring another one,” he answered.

She wasn’t surprised. The woman her grandfather had hired after her grandmother died had to be getting close to seventy. But on the other hand, she wouldn’t have put it past Donaldson to have fired the woman, either.

“I’ll have breakfast ready in a few minutes,” she said, cracking eggs into one of the bowls with one hand while she reached for a whisk with the other. “Why don’t you have a seat at the table?”

“What are you making?” he asked as he sat down at the head of the oak trestle table that had been in her grandmother’s family for over three generations.

“Blueberry and ricotta–stuffed French toast with blueberry syrup, link sausage and blueberries and cantaloupe covered with vanilla sauce,” she said, dipping extra thick slices of bread in the cinnamon-spiced egg mixture before placing them on the heated stovetop griddle.

“Sounds good, but isn’t that a little fancy for a typical ranch breakfast?” he commented. “You must really like to cook.”

She shrugged. “Since I graduated from the California School of Culinary Arts, then went to Paris for a year to study pastry, you might say I’m rather fond of it.”

“Do you have your own restaurant?”

Arranging the food on two plates, she shook her head. “No, I’m a personal chef. I’m mainly hired for dinner parties and other special in-home occasions, like graduation and anniversary

celebrations."

"That sounds like an interesting job," he said conversationally. "Do you have many clients?"

Nodding, she poured vanilla sauce over the fruit. "When I first started, I registered with the personal chef association and they referred clients to me. Now the majority of the calls I get are referrals from clients or from people who have attended the dinner parties I've prepared."

"You must be good at what you do," he said, sounding thoughtful.

Taylor carried the plates over to the table and sat down. "I'll let you be the judge." She watched him eye the food in front of him as if he wasn't sure it was safe to eat. Barely resisting the urge to laugh, she asked, "Is something wrong?"

"You made your opinion of me quite clear last night, so I'm sure you can understand my hesitation," he said, giving her a deliberate smile.

"It's true that I don't completely trust you, but that doesn't mean you can't trust me." She switched his plate with hers. "Now you have no reason not to try it."

Picking up his knife and fork, he cut into the French toast. "What do you say we start over?" he suggested. "The least we can do is be civil to each other until you go back to Los Angeles."

"I agree that being polite to each other would make negotiations for my buying your share of the ranch a lot easier," she agreed, taking a bite of fruit.

“I told you last night I’m not selling. But you could always sell your half to me,” he said, taking a bite of toast.

“Absolutely not. I love the Lucky Ace. It represents the best part of my childhood.” Irritated by his offer to buy her share, Taylor put her fork down to glare at him. “My grandfather knew how much this place meant to me and he intended for me to have it. I’m not selling it to you or anyone else.”

Donaldson calmly took a sip of his coffee. “Then before you go back to Los Angeles, we’ll have to work out an agreement on how I run the day-to-day operations and how often you want to receive dividend checks.”

“I’m not going back to L.A.,” she said, taking great satisfaction in the annoyed expression that came over his handsome face.

A forkful of toast halfway to his mouth, he slowly lowered it back to his plate. “What do you mean you aren’t going back?”

Her appetite deserting her, she rose from the table to scrape the contents of her plate in the garbage disposal. “I have every intention of making the Lucky Ace my permanent home.”

“What about your clients back in Los Angeles?” he asked, looking more irritated with each passing second. “And that backpack wasn’t big enough to hold more than a handful of clothes.”

“I informed my clients of the move over a week ago and arranged for another chef to cover the dinner parties I had scheduled,” she said, watching the frown lines on his forehead deepen further. “I sublet my apartment, stored my furniture, and

the clothes I was unable to bring with me in the car, I shipped here. Those cartons should arrive sometime next week. I told you last night when you went out to get my backpack that I was here to run the ranch and would get the rest of my things from the car today."

He suddenly got up from the table, walked over to scrape his plate, then reached for the hat hanging beside the back door.

"Will you be back for lunch?" she asked.

"No."

"Then I'll have plenty of time to clean my room this morning before I bring my things in from the car and put them away this afternoon," she said thoughtfully.

"I'll go over to the bunkhouse and see if I can get one of the men to help you with that," he answered without turning around.

Before she could thank him for his thoughtfulness, he opened the door to walk out onto the porch then forcefully pulled it shut behind him.

"He took that better than what I thought he would," she murmured as she started rinsing their dishes to put into the dishwasher. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but Donaldson's passive acceptance of her moving into the ranch house hadn't been it.

Of course, she wasn't foolish enough to think that he had given up trying to get her to sell her part of the ranch to him. But maybe now that he knew she was serious about living at the ranch, he was giving a little more thought to selling her his.

* * *

Lane rode his blue roan gelding across the pasture toward the barn at a slow walk. He had to find some way to get Taylor to sell him her share of the ranch. Or if that wasn't something she was willing to do, at least get her to go back to Los Angeles and leave him the hell alone.

He could appreciate her sentimentality about the place her grandfather owned. But he had become attached to the property as well. For the first time in over twenty years he had a place he could truly call his own. It felt good and he wasn't willing to give that up.

As he stared off across the land, he thought about the plans he had for the future. He'd made a fortune playing poker and having invested wisely, he never had to work another day in his life if he didn't want to. But he didn't consider playing poker or ranching actual jobs. Poker was a pastime. He enjoyed the challenge of competing with other equally skilled players and if he ever lost interest in it, he'd quit with no regrets. But ranching was a lifestyle, and up until six months ago, he hadn't even realized how much he had missed it. That's why he intended to improve the Lucky Ace by introducing a herd of free-range cattle, as well as start raising and training roping horses for rodeo.

But all that could change if Taylor insisted on living on the ranch and taking an active role in running it. That's why he spent the entire day riding fence, repairing windmills and tightening gates, whether they needed it or not. Keeping busy helped him

think. Unfortunately, he didn't arrive at any conclusions other than that Taylor was just as stubborn about selling her share of the ranch as he was.

When he'd won half of the Lucky Ace last fall, he had fully intended to sell it back to Ben. But the old man had asked that Lane move in and oversee the day-to-day running of the ranch while he spent the winter with his family in California. Ben had told him they would talk again in the spring and Lane could let him know if he still wanted to sell the property back to him. It had seemed like a reasonable request and Lane had agreed. But the past six months had reminded him of his time at the Last Chance Ranch and he'd decided that he might have been a little too hasty about offering to sell his interest back to Cunningham.

Lane stared off into the distance. As it turned out, being sent to the Last Chance Ranch as a teen and placed in the care of his foster father, Hank Calvert, had been the best thing that had ever happened to Lane and he had nothing but fond memories of the time he'd spent there.

Hank had been the wisest man Lane had ever had the privilege to know. He'd not only taught the boys in his care to work through their anger and self-destructive behavior by using ranch chores and rodeo, he had taught them a code of conduct that they all adhered to even as adults. Lane and the men he still called his brothers had all become honest, productive members of society because of their time with Hank. Along the way, they had bonded into a family that remained as strong, if not stronger, than any

traditional family tied together by blood.

He drew in a deep breath. Even though he had overcome his past, gained a family he loved and, with Hank's help, managed to save enough money from his junior rodeo earnings to make restitution to the people he had conned or stolen from, Lane didn't particularly like being reminded of his youthful problems.

Of course, he hadn't had much of choice in what he'd done. But stealing was stealing and whether he'd had a good reason or not, being a con artist and a thief was still wrong.

That's why he'd had such a strong reaction when Taylor accused him of swindling her grandfather. She had unwittingly reminded him of what he had been and what he might have continued to be if he hadn't straightened up his act.

Riding into the ranch yard, he dismounted Blue and led the gelding into the barn. As he removed the horse's saddle and began brushing the animal's bluish-gray coat, Lane reviewed his options.

He supposed he could sell Taylor his half of the ranch, then look around for another property. But he rejected that idea immediately. Texas might be a huge state, but there weren't that many ranches the size of the Lucky Ace up for sale. Nor were any of them located close enough that he would be able to see his brothers regularly or be there for them if they needed him. Besides, he had won his half of the ranch fair and square and no one was going to guilt him into selling it—not even a hot-as-hell redhead with the greenest eyes he'd ever seen and a figure that

made him want to spend endless hours exploring it.

When his body stirred from just thinking about her, he stopped grooming the roan and cursed his neglected libido as he led the horse into its stall. That did it. When Lane started to find a woman who frustrated him to the brink of insanity attractive enough to incite a case of lust, it was time to do something about it. As soon as he took a quick shower and got ready, he was going to make a trip over to that little honky-tonk in Beaver Dam and see if he couldn't find a warm, willing female to help him scratch this itch. Maybe then he would be able to forget how desirable Taylor Scott was and start thinking of her as he would think of any other business partner.

With a firm plan in place, he walked purposefully across the ranch yard and climbed the porch steps. "Taylor, I won't be here for supper," he said as he entered the kitchen. "I'm going over to—" He stopped short when she vigorously shook her head. "What's wrong?" he asked, walking over to where she stood at the counter mixing something in a bowl.

She nodded toward the hall. "I can't get rid of the cowboy you assigned to help me carry my things in from the car," she whispered.

"I didn't assign him to do anything," Lane said, careful to keep his voice low. "When I mentioned you needed help, he volunteered."

"Whatever. I can't get him to leave," she insisted. "We finished unloading the car over an hour ago, but he keeps coming up with

excuses to stick around. I even gave up putting my clothes away because I wasn't comfortable with him lurking in the doorway watching me."

Standing so close to her, breathing in the light scent of her herbal shampoo and noticing the perfection of her coral lips, caused every nerve in Lane's body to come to full alert. He took a step back, then another.

To distract himself from the temptation she posed, he asked, "Where's he now and what is he doing?"

"He's in the living room building a fire in the fireplace," she answered.

"It's May and the air conditioning is on. The last thing we need is to heat up the house with a fire," Lane said, frowning. "Whose bright idea was that?"

"Mine." She set the bowl aside and reached for some small white ceramic ramekins. "I had to think of something to keep him busy until you got back from wherever it was you went this morning."

"I was out riding fence and repairing some of the windmills," he answered defensively. He didn't owe her an explanation of his whereabouts, so why did he feel compelled to give her one?

"It's Sunday and after they tend to the livestock, even the hired men have the day off," she said, her tone disapproving. "Couldn't those chores have waited until tomorrow?"

It suddenly occurred to Lane that the impatience in Taylor's voice stemmed from her uneasiness about being around the man

in the other room, not because she was annoyed by his daylong absence from the house.

"I'll get rid of him," he said, turning toward the hall. When he walked into the living room he found Roy Lee Wilks kneeling beside the fireplace, failing miserably at building a fire in the stone firebox. "Don't worry about the fire, Roy Lee. I don't think we'll be needing it. It's well over eighty degrees outside."

"Hey there, boss," the young man said, sitting back on his heels. "I wondered why Ms. Scott wanted me to build a fire." He removed his sweat-stained ball cap to run a hand through his shaggy blond hair. "I wasn't having much luck at getting it started anyway."

Lane checked his watch. "Marty should just about have supper ready over at the bunkhouse. It would probably be a good idea to get over there before Cletus eats his share and yours, too."

Putting his cap back on, Roy Lee rose to his feet and nodded. "I'll do that as soon as I check with Ms. Scott to see if she needs me to do anything else."

Lane shook his head. "Thanks, but you've spent most of your day off helping her and I'm sure you'd like to rest up before you move that herd of heifers over to the north pasture tomorrow morning. If she wants something else done, I'll take care of it."

The man looked as though he might want to argue the point, but apparently he decided that crossing the boss might not be a wise choice. "I guess I'll see you in the morning then," he finally said, turning toward the hall.

Lane leaned one shoulder against the kitchen doorway and waited for Roy Lee to bid Taylor a good evening and leave before he walked over to where she stood at the counter finishing the dessert she was working on. “Now that your problem is solved with Roy Lee, I’m going to take a shower and drive over to Beaver Dam for the evening.”

“You won’t be here for dinner?” she asked, looking disappointed. “I’m making prime rib, twice-baked potatoes with herbs and cheese, asparagus spears with hollandaise sauce and crème brûlée for dessert.”

She had apparently been too distracted by wanting to get rid of Roy Lee to have heard him tell her earlier that he was leaving for the evening. He shifted from one foot to the other as he stared into her crystalline green eyes. She was going to a lot of trouble making dinner and if the look on her pretty face was any indication, she was going to be extremely disappointed if he didn’t stick around to eat it. He decided right then and there that if he wanted to talk her into selling her share of the ranch to him, or at the very least convince her to go back to L.A., he was going to have to placate her. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of getting her to agree to anything.

“I thought you might not feel like making dinner after spending the day unpacking and arranging your things,” he lied.

She gave him a smile that caused a hitch in his breathing. “Cooking is one of the ways I relax.”

“Do I have time to take a quick shower before dinner?” he

asked, unbuttoning the cuffs of his work shirt.

"Sure." She placed the ceramic ramekins in a pan with water in the bottom, then began to fill them with the crème brûlée mixture. "Everything should be ready by the time you come back downstairs."

Nodding, Lane clenched his jaw as he walked out of the kitchen and headed upstairs. He wasn't the least bit happy about the change in his plans for the evening. But there wasn't anything he could do about it now. It was one of those damned if he did and damned if he didn't situations where no matter what he chose to do, he'd be the one suffering the consequences.

Taylor would take it as a deliberate insult if he didn't have dinner with her and insulting her would make it impossible to talk to her about the future of the ranch. And then there was the matter of the itch he needed to scratch. Just being in the same room with her seemed to charge the atmosphere with a tension that sent hormones racing through his veins at the speed of light, reminding him that he was a man with a man's needs.

When his body tightened in response to that thought, he muttered a guttural curse and headed straight into the bathroom to turn on the cold water. Stripping off his dusty clothes, he stepped inside and hoped the icy spray would clear his head, as well as traumatize his body into submission.

As he stood there with his teeth chattering like a pair of cheap castanets, a plan began to take shape in his mind. If successful, it would settle things once and for all. And the sooner he got Taylor

to agree to it, the better.

If he didn't, he had a feeling one of two things would happen. She would either drive him completely insane or he would end up suffering frostbite on parts of his body that no man ever wanted to think about freezing.

Three

"Thank you for getting rid of Roy Lee for me," Taylor said as she sat down in the chair Donaldson held for her. "I was so relieved to finally have him out of the house, I forgot to thank you earlier."

He shrugged as he sat down at the head of the table. "I don't think he meant any harm."

"Probably not," she admitted. "He's just always seemed a little creepy to me, even as a teenager."

"So you've known him a long time?"

She nodded. "He started working summers here before he got out of high school." Pausing, she had to think back. "That would have been about twelve years ago."

"Besides overstaying his welcome this afternoon, has Roy Lee ever said or done anything else that made you feel uncomfortable?" Donaldson asked, taking a sip of the cabernet she'd had him open and pour for them.

"Not really." Pushing the asparagus spears around her plate with her fork, she tried to put into words how she felt whenever she was around the man. "I know it's probably just my imagination, but he seems to watch every move I make."

Looking up, she added, “You know, like those paintings with eyes that follow you around the room.” She couldn’t keep from shuddering. “He’s that kind of creepy.”

“I’ll try to make sure he stays away from the house,” Donaldson said, taking a bite of his prime rib. Swallowing the tender beef, he smiled. “This is really good.”

“Thank you,” she answered, hoping her cooking worked its magic and put him in a good mood. “I’m glad you like it.”

They fell into an awkward silence for the rest of the meal and by the time they finished dessert, Taylor’s nerves felt ready to snap. Yesterday she had tried talking him into selling his share of the ranch to her and that hadn’t worked. Hopefully there was something to the old adage that the way to a man’s heart was through his stomach. Only in this case, she was hoping to appeal to his sense of justice. The Lucky Ace had been in her family for years and her grandfather had known just how much the place meant to her. He’d always told her that one day he wanted it to be hers and not once had he mentioned that he intended for her to share it with someone else.

“After we get the kitchen cleaned up, I’d like to discuss something with you,” Donaldson said, interrupting her troubled thoughts.

“About the ranch?” she asked, afraid to hope that he had changed his mind and was going to be reasonable about it.

He nodded as he rose to his feet and reached for her empty ramekin. “It’s a nice evening. I thought we could go out on the

front porch and watch the sun go down while we talk."

Getting up from the table, she walked over and began rinsing their dishes to put into the dishwasher while he put the leftover prime rib in a plastic storage container and placed it in the refrigerator. As they worked side by side to clean the kitchen, Taylor's nervousness increased tenfold, and it had nothing whatsoever to do with their upcoming discussion about the ranch.

Why did she have to notice how handsome Donaldson looked in his black shirt and jeans? And why did he have to smell so darned good? There was something about the combination of expensive leather and the scent of clean male skin that was just plain sexy.

Their fingers touched as he handed her their wineglasses and Taylor felt a streak of longing course straight through her. She came dangerously close to dropping one of the delicate crystal goblets.

"It won't take me more than a few minutes to finish up here." She cleared her throat and hoped her voice didn't sound as husky to him as it did to her. "Why don't you go on out to the porch?"

"Are you sure?" Was that relief she detected in his deep baritone? Had he felt the tension surrounding them as well?

Forcing a smile, she nodded. "I won't be long."

When he turned and walked down the hall toward the front of the house, Taylor placed her forearms on the sink and sagged against it. How could one man exude so much sex appeal? And

why on earth wasn't she impervious to it?

Lane Donaldson was the intruder—the enemy—and the very last man she should find appealing. But as she finished wiping off the counters, she had to admit that beyond his devastating good looks, there was a certain charm about him that any woman would find hard to resist. How many men still had the manners to hold a chair for a woman when she sat down at the table? Or insist on retrieving her bag from the car and carrying it upstairs, especially after she had accused him of stealing part of her grandfather's ranch?

She did feel a bit guilty about that. But at the time she had been angry and certain that her grandfather had been victimized by Donaldson. But now?

She still wasn't sure that he hadn't exploited her grandfather. But there was one thing she was certain of—he wasn't going to take advantage of her.

"All finished in the kitchen?" Donaldson asked over his shoulder when she pushed the screen door open and walked out onto the porch a few minutes later. He was sitting on the steps with his forearms propped on his knees, staring out at the sun sinking low in the western sky.

"There wasn't really much left to do," she answered, walking over to sit in the porch swing.

They were both silent for several long minutes before he finally spoke again. "I've been thinking about our situation," he said slowly. "And I'm pretty sure I've come up with a solution."

"Are you going to sell me your share of the ranch?" she asked. As far as she was concerned, that was the only acceptable answer.

His deep chuckle sent a shiver streaking up her spine. "No. And I'm betting you aren't willing to sell me yours."

"Not a chance," she shot back.

"I figured as much." He got to his feet and walked over to lean one shoulder against the porch support post in front of her. "But I think the one thing we do agree on is the fact that the way things are now is unacceptable."

She nodded. "You're right about that. There's nothing about this that I find even remotely acceptable."

"Before I tell you what I have in mind, I'd like to ask that you hear me out before you give me your answer," he said, folding his arms across his wide chest. "Do you think you can do that, Taylor?"

His deep baritone voice saying her name caused her to catch her breath. "A-all right. What have you come up with?"

"I want us to play poker," he said, meeting her questioning gaze. "If you win, I'll sell you my share of the Lucky Ace and you'll be rid of me for good."

Taylor's heart sank. Her grandfather might have been a world-class poker player, but she had never taken an interest in the game and didn't have a clue about how to play. What chance would she have against someone like Donaldson?

Besides, she wasn't entirely certain she could trust that he would play honestly. And even if he did, he was a professional

and in the same elite category as her grandfather had been. She wouldn't have a prayer of winning against him.

"And if you should happen to win?" she asked, knowing she wasn't going to like his answer.

He smiled. "If I win, you go back to California and I stay right here."

"Absolutely not," she said, shaking her head. "I'm not taking a chance of losing my share—"

He held up his hand to stop her. "You promised to hear me out."

Glaring at him, she folded her arms beneath her breasts. "All right," she conceded. "Continue."

"I didn't mention anything about you losing your interest in the ranch," he said calmly. "If I win, you would retain your half of the place, go back to California and be content with occasional visits. And I'm sure we can come to an agreement on how often you want to receive reports and dividend checks, as well as sign documents stating that if either of us ever decide we want to sell our share, we'll give the other the first right of purchase."

Suspicious, she asked, "Why are you willing to be so generous? You told me that if I won, you would sell me your half. Doesn't that work both ways? Wouldn't you want my share if I lost?"

"It's true that I'd like to own the entire property," he admitted. "But I know this land belonged to your grandfather and that you have a sentimental attachment to it. I respect that and wouldn't

ask you to give it up if it means that much to you."

"Why do you want it?" she demanded. There had to be a reason behind his stubbornness about not selling his part of the ranch and she was determined to find out what it was. "You don't have the same ties to it that I do."

He paused for a moment as he stared down at his boots. When he looked up, he shrugged his broad shoulders. "I finished growing up on a place a lot like this one and until I moved here last fall, I didn't realize how much I missed living on a ranch."

"Surely there are other places you could buy," she said, hoping he would see reason. "Texas isn't the only state with ranch property. I'm sure you could find something suitable somewhere else. And you wouldn't have a business partner. You would be the sole owner."

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