

Darn Good Cowboy Christmas (Spikes & Spurs)

By Carolyn Brown



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Book 3 in the Spikes & Spurs Series

He's One Hot Cowboy...And She's Out For a Sizzlin' Christmas

Raylen O'Donnell is one smokin' cowboy. He could have any woman he wants, but he's never been able to forget a certain dark-haired girl who disappeared from his life. So when she suddenly returns to the ranch next door, Raylen's not fixing to let her get away again.

Raised in a traveling carnival, Lizelle Hanson thought all she wanted was a house that didn't have wheels and a sexy cowboy for her very own. But when settling down's going to take some getting used to, and catching Raylen, the hotter-than-hell cowboy next door, might just take a little holiday magic.

Spikes & Spurs Series

Love Drunk Cowboy (Book 1)

Red's Hot Cowboy (Book 2)

Darn Good Cowboy Christmas (Book 3)

One Hot Cowboy Wedding (Book 4)

Mistletoe Cowboy (Book 5)

Just a Cowboy and His Baby (Book 6)

Cowboy Seeks Bride (Book 7)

Praise for *Honky Tonk Christmas*:

"Sassy contemporary romance. . . with all the local color and humorous repartee her fans adore." - *Booklist*

"This book makes me believe in Christmas miracles and long slow kisses under the mistletoe." - *The Romance Studio*

"Anything but predictable. The most difficult thing about reading a Brown book is putting it down." - *Fresh Fiction*



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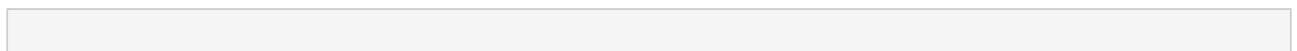
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Darn Good Cowboy Christmas (Spikes & Spurs) By Carolyn Brown Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

"A feel-good read.... a romance worth reading." - ***RT Book Reviews***

"A story with a cowboy always hits the target, but add a little Christmas flair and a saucy heroine and you have a winner... Hot, humorous and a great time." - ***The Long and Short of It Reviews***

"A great book for a Christmas warmup, it makes you want to believe in Santa. Throw your hats in the air and stomp your feet for Carolyn Brown." - ***BookLoons.com***

"Sassy and quirky and peopled with an abundance of engaging characters, this fast-paced holiday romp brims with music, laughter... and plenty of Texas flavor." - ***Library Journal***

"Brown has once again delivered a well-rounded group of characters you will wish were your neighbors." - ***Thoughts in Progress***

"Snuggle down and get ready for a holiday ride that will make you laugh out loud and get the romance flowing." - ***Eva's Sanctuary***

"So fun and full of life." - ***Books Like Breathing***

"A heartwarming romance, that was as much fun to read as the bedroom scenes were hot!" - ***Dark Divas Reviews***

"Carolyn Brown creates some handsomefied, hunkified, HOT cowboys! ...a fun, enjoyable four-star-Christmas-to-remember novel." - ***The Romance Reviews***

"Laugh-out-loud humor... sexy banter... trademark Carolyn Brown cowboy romance." - ***Drey's Library***

"Brown seems to always be able to blend her novels together well with the romance and humor which always makes for a delightful read! Bring on the cowboys!!!" - ***Books, Movies, Reviews! Oh My!***

"An outstanding Christmas story." - ***Sugarbeat's Books***

"Full of sizzling chemistry and razor sharp dialogue. 4 1/2 Stars, Reviewer Top Pick" - ***Night Owl Reviews***

"An earthy, sensual story... an array of quirky characters make this a fun holiday read." - ***USA Today's Happy Ever After Blog***

"If you love Christmas romances and cowboys then DARN GOOD COWBOY CHRISTMAS is a must read." - ***The Book Girl***

"There is one thing I have come to connect with Brown's books, and that is that they always makes me smile... They are sweet and fun." - ***Book Girl of Mur-y-Castell***

About the Author

Carolyn Brown is an award-winning author who has published 36 bestselling romances for the library market. She now writes bestselling single title cowboy and country music mass market romances. Born in Texas and raised in southern Oklahoma, Carolyn and her husband now make their home in the town of Davis, Oklahoma.

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Chapter 1

It was just a white frame house at the end of a long lane.

But it did not have wheels.

Liz squinted against the sun sinking in the west and imagined it with multicolored Christmas lights strung all around the porch, the windows, even in the cedar tree off to the left side. In her vision, it was a Griswold house from Christmas Vacation that lit up the whole state of Texas. She hoped that when she flipped the switch she didn't cause a major blackout because in a few weeks it was going to look like the house on that old movie that she loved.

Now where was the cowboy to complete the package?

Christmas lights on a house without wheels and a cowboy in tight fittin' jeans and in boots-that's what she asked for every year when her mother asked for her Christmas list. She didn't remember the place being so big when she visited her uncle those two times. Once when she was ten and then again when she was fourteen. But both of those times she'd been quite taken with the young cowboy next door and didn't pay much attention to the house itself. The brisk Texas wind whipped around ferociously as if saying that it could send her right back to east Texas if she didn't change her mind about the house.

"I don't think so," she giggled. "I know a thing or two about Texas wind, and it'd take more than a class five tornado to get rid of me. This is what I've wanted all my life, and I think it's the prettiest house in Montague County. It's sittin' on a foundation, and oh, my God, he's left Hooter and Blister for me. Uncle Haskell, I could kiss you!"

The wind pushed its way into the truck, bringing a few fall leaves with it when she opened the truck door. Aunt Tressa would say that was an omen; the place was welcoming her into its arms. Her mother would say that the wind was blowing her back to the carnival where she belonged.

The old dog, Hooter, slowly came down off the porch, head down, wagging his tail. Blister, the black and white cat, eyed her suspiciously from the ladder-back chair on the tiny porch.

Her high heels sunk into the soft earth, leaving holes as she rushed across the yard toward the yellow dog. She squatted down, hugged the big yellow mutt, and scratched his ears. "You beautiful old boy. You are the icing on the cake. Now I've got animals and a house. This is a damn fine night."

The key was under the chair, tucked away in a faded ceramic frog, just where her Uncle Haskell said it would be when she talked to him earlier that afternoon. But he hadn't mentioned leaving the two animals. She'd thank him for that surprise when she called him later on.

She opened the wooden screen door and was about to put the key in the lock when the door swung open. And there he was! Raylen O'Donnell, all grown up and even sexier than she remembered. Her heart thumped so hard she could feel it pushing against her bra. Her hands were shaky and her knees weak, but she took a

deep breath, willed her hands to be still, and locked her knees in place.

"If it's religion you're sellin' or anything else, we're not interested," Raylen said in a deep Texas drawl. He'd been pouring a glass of tea in the kitchen when he heard a noise. Hooter hadn't barked, so he figured it was just the wind, but when he opened the door he'd been more shocked than the woman standing there with wide eyes and a spooked expression on her face.

She wore skintight black jeans that looked like they'd been spray painted on her slim frame. Without those spike heels she would've barely come to his shoulder, and Raylen was the shortest of the three O'Donnell brothers, tipping the chart at five feet ten inches. Her jet-black hair had been twisted up and clipped, but strands had escaped the shiny silver clasp and found their way to her shoulder. Her eyes were so dark brown that they looked ebony.

"Raylen?" she said.

Her voice was husky, with a touch of gravel, adding to her exotic looks. It made Raylen think of rye whiskey with a teaspoon of honey and a twist of lemon. He'd heard that voice before. It had been branded on his brain for eleven years, but she couldn't be Haskell's niece. Liz wasn't supposed to be there until the first of the week at the earliest.

"That's right. Who are you?" he asked cautiously.

"I happen to own this place," she said with a flick of her hand.

"Liz?" Raylen started at her toes and let his gaze travel slowly all the way to her eyebrows. She'd been a pretty teenager, but now she was a stunning woman.

"Surprise! I guess this chunk of Texas dirt now belongs to me. What are you doing here?" she asked.

Could Raylen really be the cowboy Santa was going to leave under her Christmas tree? He'd sure enough been the one she had in mind when she asked for a cowboy. She'd visualized him in tight fittin' jeans and boots when she was younger. Lately, she'd changed it to nothing but a Santa hat and the boots.

His hair was still a rich, dark brown, almost black until the sunlight lit up the deep chestnut color. His eyes were exactly as she remembered: pale, icy blue rimmed with dark brown lashes. It all added up to a heady combination, enough to make her want to tangle her hands up in all that dark hair and kiss him until she swooned like a heroine in one of those old castle romances she'd read since she was a teenager. Speaking of kissing, where in the hell was the mistletoe when a woman needed it, anyway?

Cowboys have roots, not wings. Don't get involved with one or you'll smother to death in a remote backwoods farm or else die of boredom. Her mother's voice whispered so close to her ear that she turned to make sure Marva Jo Hanson hadn't followed her to Ringgold, Texas.

Raylen stood to one side. "I came to feed and water Hooter and Blister. Haskell asked me to do that until you got here. We met when we were kids, remember?"

"I do," she said. How could she forget? She'd been in love with Raylen O'Donnell since she was fourteen years old.

"Haskell said that if you didn't like it here, he'd sell me your twenty acres." Now that was a helluva thing to blurt out, but he couldn't very well say that she'd grown up to be the most exotic creature he'd ever laid eyes on. He'd thought she was cuter than any girl he'd ever seen when she was about fourteen or fifteen, but he

hadn't realized that she'd only been the bud of the rose. The full-blown flower was standing before him right then, making him fidget like a little boy.

"I'm going to live here. Uncle Haskell said if I like it, he'll deed the place over to me in the spring. The place isn't for sale and won't be," she said.

"And do what? Ringgold isn't very big."

She shrugged. "I don't know. Pet the cat. Feed the dog."

"That won't make a living, lady," Raylen said.

She popped both hands on her hips. "I don't reckon what I do for a living is one damn bit of your business, cowboy. Do you intend to let me come into my house?"

Why in the hell was he arguing with her? Never in all the scenarios that she'd imagined did he cross her. He'd kissed her. He'd swept her off her feet and carried her to a big white pickup truck and they'd driven off into the sunset. He'd smiled and said that he remembered her well and she'd grown up into a beautiful woman. But he hadn't argued.

Raylen motioned her into the house with a wave of his hand. She brushed across his chest as she entered the house and was acutely aware of the sparks dancing all over the room but attributed it to anger or disappointment, maybe even a bitter dose of both. She'd had Raylen on a pedestal for more than a decade and he didn't even recognize her. He was probably married and had three or four kids too. That was just her luck!

When she fanned past him he got a whiff of a sensuous perfume that went with her dark, gypsy looks, and he wanted to follow after her like a lost puppy dog.

"I'll take over feeding the cat and dog," she said.

"Okay, then here's the key Haskell gave me." He dug into his pocket and handed her an old key ring with two keys on it. "Welcome to Ringgold, Liz. I still live on the ranch that surrounds this land. Haskell sold me most of his ranch six months ago, all but the part the house sits on."

"He told me."

Raylen headed for the door, "The O'Donnells are your closest neighbors. Come around to see us sometime. Be seein' you."

She wanted to say something; she really did. But not one word would come out of her mouth. Raylen in her living room, looking even sexier than he had when he was seventeen and exercising the horses. Raylen, all grown up, a man instead of a lanky teenager, talking to her... it was such a shock and a surprise that she was speechless. And that was strange territory for Lizelle Hanson.

"Dammit!" she swore.

The noise of the truck engine filled the house for a moment then faded. She'd been so stunned to see him that she couldn't think straight. She hadn't known what to expect, but it sure wasn't what she got. She fished a cell phone from her jacket pocket and punched a speed dial number.

"I'm here," she said when her mother answered.

"And?"

Liz giggled nervously. "It's bigger than I remembered, and there's a sexy cowboy who lives next door but he's probably married and has six kids because no guy that pretty isn't taken. I'd forgotten how big the house is after living in the carnie trailer."

"Have you unpacked? You can turn around and come back right now. You could be here in time to take your shift tomorrow night, and my brother can sell it to those horse ranchers next door to him."

"Not yet. I was on my way in the house when Raylen opened the door and scared the hell out of me. Hooter and Blister are still alive and well. I'm not ready to throw in the towel yet."

"Raylen?" Marva Jo asked.

"The sexy cowboy. I met him both times I came to visit Uncle Haskell. Remember when I told you about the boy that tried to beat me walkin' the fence when I was ten? That was Raylen."

"You are right. He's probably married and has a couple of kids. I was hoping the house would be butt ugly to you."

"No, ma'am. I squinted real hard and even imagined it with Christmas lights. Looked pretty damn fine," Liz said.

"We'll be in Bowie in a few weeks. By then you'll be sick to death of boredom. You were born for the carnie and travel," Marva said.

"I will have the Christmas lights on the house when you get here," Liz said.

"A house not on wheels with Christmas lights and a cowboy." Marva laughed. "Be careful that the latter doesn't cut off your beautiful wings, because that part of the country produces a crop of hot cowboys every generation."

"Good night, Momma. I love you," Liz said.

"Love you too, kid. Go prove me right about getting bored to tears. It's only half an hour until time to tell fortunes and I still have to get my makeup on. Does that make you miss me?"

"Not yet. I only saw you this morning. Hug Aunt Tressa and I'll see you in a few weeks."

Raylen drove down the lane and stopped. The left blinker was on, but he couldn't make himself pull out onto the highway. The whole incident at Haskell's place had been surreal. Haskell said his niece, Liz, was going to take over the property. He remembered Liz very well. She was the ten-year-old who'd walked the rail fence better than him even though he was thirteen. She was the fourteen-year-old who rested her elbows on the same rail fence and watched him exercise the horses. Now she was so pretty she sucked every sane thought out of his brain.

He finally pulled out on Highway 81 and headed north a mile, then turned left into the O'Donnell horse ranch. She'd find out pretty quick that a person couldn't make a living by petting the cat and feeding the dog, and when she did he intended to be the first in line to buy her twenty acres. It was the only property for a three-mile stretch down the highway that didn't belong to the O'Donnells.

He parked in the backyard, crawled out of the truck, and sat down on the porch step to his folks' house. Dewar drove up, parked next to him, hopped out of his truck, and swaggered to the porch. Just a year older than Raylen, Dewar was taller by several inches. His hair was so black that it had a faint blue cast as the sunrays bounced off it. His eyes were a strange mossy shade of green and his face square. His Wranglers were tight and dusty; his boots were worn down at the heels and covered with mud.

"Y'all get those cattle worked at Rye's?" Raylen looked down at his own boots. They were just as worn down at the heels and covered with horseshit. His jeans had a hole in one knee and frayed hems on both pant legs. His shirt looked like it had been thrown out in the round horse corral for a solid week and then used for a dog bed a month after that. Damn it all to the devil and back again. He'd planned on at least meeting Liz the first time in clean duds, not looking like a bum off the streets.

"Yes, we did, and we would've got them done sooner if our younger brother would've helped," Dewar said.

"Aww, y'all didn't need me. And besides, if you worked harder and played with Rachel less, you'd get more done."

"Bullshit! You're just tryin' to find excuses." Dewar grinned.

Rachel was their oldest brother's new baby daughter, the first O'Donnell grandchild, and only a few months old. Her father, Rye, was Raylen and Dewar's oldest brother. Her mother, Austin, had been a Tulsa socialite until she inherited a watermelon farm across the river in Terral, Oklahoma, and fell in love with Rye. Rachel was getting to know her two uncles and it was an ongoing battle about which one would be the favorite.

"Want a beer? I swear I'm spittin' dust and hot summer is long since past," Dewar said.

"I'd drink a beer with you," Raylen said.

Dewar disappeared into the house and brought out two longneck bottles of Coors, and he handed one to Raylen. "So you got the chores done around here or am I going to have to do those too?"

"All finished. Everything with four legs has been fed and watered. Horses are all exercised, and even Haskell's dog and cat are fed. His niece is over there now. She can take care of Hooter and Blister." He turned up the bottle and downed a fourth of it before coming up for air and a burp.

Dewar plopped down on the porch step beside Raylen. "Is she going to keep the place or do you have a chance at buying it?"

"Says she is going to keep it. I asked her what she was going to do to make a living in Ringgold, Texas, and she said she was going to feed the dog and pet the cat. Hell, if Haskell gives her his money as well as that twenty acres, she won't have to do nothing but feed a dog and pet a cat."

"What's she look like?"

"Damn fine. Not a thing like old Haskell. She's got jet-black hair and the blackest eyes you've ever seen, and her skin is this light toast color that says she's got some kind of exotic blood in her. Build like a red brick outhouse without a single brick out of place."

"You took with her?"

"Hell, no!" Raylen said too quickly.

Liz stood in the middle of the living room floor and turned around slowly. The room was bigger than the fifth wheel travel trailer where she'd lived her entire life. A stone fireplace with a real chimney was centered on the north end with a stone apron in the front. Two brown leather recliners flanked a sofa dated in the seventies with its wagon wheel arms and six brown corduroy cushions. The coffee table sat on a real cowhide area rug. A wheeled cart on the east side of the fireplace held a small television set, and as if something had to be used to balance the arrangement, a ladder-back chair was on the other side with a pot of silk greenery on it. That whole arrangement scarcely took up half of the big room.

The south end was covered with empty bookcases, floor to ceiling. Uncle Haskell had said that she'd have to start her own collection because he was taking all his beloved Westerns with him. Another sofa faced the bookcase. That one was orange and yellow floral velvet, had deep cushions and big round arms that begged for someone to settle in with a good book. A wagon wheel chandelier hung in the middle of the room over a library table with a set of horse head bookends and a well worn Webster's Dictionary in the middle. An antique oak business chair was set at an angle as if waiting for Uncle Haskell to come back and look up a word.

It wouldn't take a lot of rearranging to give the room a more open and less cut-up look. Take the table and put it in front of the bookcases. Move the floral sofa under the window to the east, and angle the fireplace arrangement.

"Oh, oh! And a Christmas tree right there with lots of presents under it, and garland looped around the ceiling caught up with Christmas bulbs. And cedar boughs strewn on the mantel with a nativity scene in the middle." Excitement filled the whole room as she pictured her first Christmas in her own home.

But that was another day's work. Right then she was hungry and she hadn't even thought about bringing groceries with her. She wandered into a country kitchen with cabinets making a U on three sides and a small maple table and four chairs set right in the middle. A picture of her, back when she was ten, was stuck to the front of the refrigerator. It had to have been taken that summer when she showed up Raylen by staying on the top of the fence longer than he did. That and when she was fourteen were the only two times her mother let her spend the day at Uncle Haskell's place.

She remembered her short, stocky uncle inviting her for the day and her mother shaking her head. "What can it hurt, Marva Jo? She just wants to see my new puppy. His name is Hooter and he loves little kids," Haskell had said. "Come on. I promise not to put fertilizer on her feet."

On the way to his house she'd asked him why he'd want to put fertilizer on her feet. "It's a joke, Lizelle. Your momma is afraid if you see how I live that you'll like it."

Later, when she was older, her mother had admitted that she had seriously never wanted her to get acquainted with the way the other side lived, for fear she'd want that instead of the carnie life.

"We were all born into the same family. All grew up in the carnival. But Haskell, the one who is supposed to be running this business, wanted roots. I don't want that for you, my child. I want freedom and wings for you. And I've been afraid you'd get his genes and want the other side's life. He is like Momma. She stayed with the carnival because she loved Daddy, but she loved settling down for the winter months more than the traveling ones," Marva Jo had said.

Liz's stomach grumbled and she forgot about the picture of the dark-haired girl in the picture and looked inside the refrigerator. It was empty except for a chunk of cheddar cheese and a tall pitcher of sweet tea. She

rustled up a glass from the cabinet and a tray of ice from the freezer. The tea was sweet, cold, and tasted wonderful. There was half a loaf of bread still within its date on the cabinet. She opened a pantry door to find a walk-in room with loaded shelves on three sides. Supper would be soup and cheese, and soon, because she was starving. She'd left Jefferson, Texas, that morning with butterflies the size of dragons in her stomach so she'd skipped lunch.

She heated a can of vegetable soup, leaned against the counter, and let the scene from two days ago replay in her mind. Marva had come into the trailer late and opened a can of beer. She'd propped a hip against the cabinet in the tiny kitchen and took a long gulp as she watched Liz remove her fortune-teller's makeup.

"What do you want for Christmas, kid?" Marva asked.

As if by rote, Liz grinned and said, "A house with no wheels and a sexy cowboy."

"Your Uncle Haskell called a couple of weeks ago. Poppa is ailing and needs full-time help these days. Tressa and I've been talkin' about one of us staying with him for the first half of the run next year, and then switching off, and the second one staying with him the last half. But Haskell drove out to visit him last week and came up with another idea. He says that he's used to living in one place and is ready to retire. He's already sold off most of his ranch. We talked about it and Poppa likes the idea of having his son nearby. So Haskell bought one of those prefab houses and had it moved on the land. It's built to be wheelchair accessible so if Poppa gets to where he can't get around or take care of himself with Haskell's help, then he can live there too. Now here's the rest of the story. The part that I don't like but Haskell and Poppa both say is the right thing." Marva Jo looked like she'd just come from a funeral, or worse yet was about to go to one.

Liz would never forget the pain in her mother's face. "Haskell is giving his house and the last twenty acres of his ranch to you. If you like it, come spring, he'll put the whole thing over in your name. We'll be in Bowie the last week in November just like always, so I will see you then. That's a month from now and by then I hope you have changed your mind about living in a real house. So it's up to you, kid. You really want a house with no wheels, or has it been a big joke between us all these years?"

Liz had whispered, "Holy hell! Yes, Momma, I want it."

"Then pack your bags, girl. You're leavin' in the morning. If you decide you want to come back to the carnival, you're always welcome, and the people next door to Haskell's have already said they are interested in buying the acres and the house. Me, I hope to hell that you hate the damn place in a week or even a day. I don't want you to go, but Haskell and Poppa are right. You are twenty-five. It's time for you to make your decision about being a carnie forever or quitting the business."

"And so here I am," Liz said aloud as she poured the soup into a bowl. "I guess Raylen is the one Momma was talkin' about buying my property. Well, ain't that the holy shits! I've wanted to see his pretty blue eyes again for eleven years and he wants my house and land. I got what I wanted, but it'll be a cold day in hell when he gets what he wants."

After she'd eaten two bowls of soup and a chunk of cheese, she washed up her dishes, a habit her mother had instilled in her from childhood. "In a trailer this size there's no room for clutter," she'd said so many times that Liz couldn't count them.

She went back to the living room, found the light switch, turned on the hall light, and started down the hall. Four doors opened off the hallway. Haskell's bedroom was the first on the right, across the hall from the bathroom, and swept clean. Not even a lonesome, old dust bunny scampered into the corner. The next two offered up two more bedrooms. One very small one was completely empty. She vaguely remembered a desk

being in the room. She swung open the fourth door to find another bedroom with a four-poster bed, dresser with a big round mirror above it, and one of those old-time vanities with a velvet bench that pulled up to a three-sided mirror. The bed looked like it covered an acre and made her feel small when she kicked off her shoes and stretched out on it.

The wind brushed a tree limb across the window screen and Hooter set up a long, low, lonesome howl right under the window. It sounded as if he were mourning the loss of his master, which sent chill bumps dancing up and down Liz's arms. She threw her legs over the side of the bed and hurried back down the hall, through the kitchen, and slung open the back door.

"What is it, old boy?" she asked.

If dogs could grin, Hooter did. He lowered his head and marched into the house, across the kitchen floor, and to the recliner in the living room where he turned around three times before snuggling down on the cow skin rug. Liz had been so busy watching the process that she hadn't realized Blister had snuck in with Hooter until the cat brushed past her leg. She jumped straight up and let out a screech, her heart pounding so hard that she threw a hand on her chest to keep it from jumping out on the floor and shooting past her in a blaze that would rival the cat.

Blister slowed down before she reached the recliner and touched noses with Hooter before settling down on the back of the chair like a fur collar on a fancy winter coat.

They both looked up at her mournfully as if asking why she didn't join them, but she shook her head. "I've got to haul suitcases and boxes into the house. I don't have time to sit around and watch television, but thank you for the invitation. If it's still on after I unpack, maybe I'll take you up on it later this evening."

Put them outside. Do not pet them or let them stay in the house. You'll get attached and it will make leaving even harder. You know what happened that time I was gone for two days, and you hid that kitten in the trailer, her mother's voice argued with her.

"I'm not leaving, Momma. I wasn't teasing when I said I wanted a house and a cowboy for Christmas. Every time we go into a new town, I wonder what it would be like to live in one of the houses in that town. Now I get to find out."

Hooter rolled his big, soulful eyes up at her as if asking what she was talking about. She reached down and scratched Hooter's ears as she walked past him and out into the night. She had two suitcases, a worn old fiddle case, and two boxes to unload. It wasn't much to show for twenty-five years, but when two people share a travel trailer, there's not room to collect junk. Only the very precious items could be saved, and they were in the boxes. She carried in the suitcases and set them inside the door and went back for the boxes.

She looked north but couldn't see anything but the moon and one star hanging in the sky. Raylen lived over there. She'd never seen the house, but Uncle Haskell said that his nearest neighbor lived a mile to the north. Was he over there with his wife and a house full of kids? Were they loading up in his truck or van or whatever his wife drove to go to town for fast food and a movie? Would she get bored by the end of the winter season and be ready to go back on the road with the carnival?

She sighed and carried her fiddle case inside, then the two small boxes. She was now officially moved in and it was exhilarating. The dog and cat looked up with soulful eyes and she told them, "Work first. Play later."

When she'd finished putting her crystal ball on the vanity, a snapshot of her mother and Tressa in full costume on the dresser, and her deck of worn Tarot cards on the bedside table, she felt more at home in the

big room. She popped open the suitcases and hung jeans, flowing skirts, a few shirts, and a denim jacket in the closet; arranged underwear, pajamas, and three bright colored costumes in dresser drawers; and set several pair of high-heeled shoes, a pair of Nikes, and a pair of scuffed up cowboy boots on the closet floor.

"Work is done. Now I can play," she said.

She headed up the hallway. Blister opened one eye but didn't budge from the recliner. Hooter raised his head and looked toward the door.

"Already wanting to go back outside, are you?" The words were barely out of her mouth when someone knocked hard on the door.

She hadn't heard a vehicle and the dog hadn't stirred. Some watchdog Hooter was! She opened the door to find Raylen leaning on the jamb.

"Evenin'," he said in a deep Texas drawl.

"Good evenin'," she said.

"You goin' to invite me in?" he asked.

In carnival life few people came inside the trailer. When they knocked on the door, it usually came with an invitation to come outside, to eat supper at the community potluck, to take a walk around the grounds, or to pet the horses. It had to be pretty serious between two people for them to spend time inside a trailer together. Her mother had never brought a man, carnival worker or any other, inside the trailer. Tressa was the only person Liz could remember ever sitting at the small kitchen table with them.

"Well?" Raylen asked.

She stepped aside. If she was going to embrace a normal life she'd have to get used to the rules. "Come in. I'm sorry. I just got unpacked and my mind was off in la-la land."

Raylen grinned. "Been there."

He went straight for the recliner where Blister had taken up residence on the back and sunk into it. Hooter raised his head and wagged his tail. Raylen scratched his ears and then turned his attention to Blister.

"They miss Haskell. I'm glad you let them in the house."

"He was howling like he was dyin'. I opened the door to see what was going on, and they both came in," she said. Should she sit in the other recliner or the sofa? She finally crossed in front of him and claimed the other chair.

"They're good animals. Blister has a litter box in the utility room off the kitchen. The litter is in the cabinet beside the washer and dryer. Hooter would explode before he'd make a mess, so there's nothing to worry about them bein' inside. Haskell said they were good company and that Hooter knew all his secrets. He told me that he was glad the dog couldn't talk."

Liz smiled. "Too bad. He could tell me stories about my uncle, I'm sure."

"Yep, he could." Raylen grinned. When she smiled, he remembered that crazy feeling in his chest when they were teenagers. She'd smiled at him over the fence and his heart had done a couple of flip-flops. He wanted

to do something fancy on the horse, like jump a hurdle, but his momma would have had his hide if he'd hurt her prize horse.

Liz inhaled deeply to ease the antsy feeling in her gut, but it didn't help. All she got was a lung full of Raylen's shaving lotion. Damn! The man had cleaned up in the last couple of hours. His boots were spit shined, his hair still glistened from a shower, and his Wranglers were starched and creased. He looked like sin on a stick all sweaty and dirty, but cleaned up-he just plumb made her mouth go dry.

Raylen rubbed Blister's fur and stole sideways glances at Liz. She'd taken the clip from her hair, and it fell below her shoulders. It was even blacker than Austin's, his brother's new wife of a little more than a year. Liz's dark eyes reminded him of a deep, dark hole that could swallow him up if he stared into them; as if they could see straight into his soul and tell him everything he'd ever thought or would think.

"So you are Uncle Haskell's nearest neighbor, now mine, I guess?" she asked.

He pointed toward the fireplace. "Less than a mile as the crow flies, straight that way. Haskell's house and ours is probably set on a plumb line, but to drive there, you have to go down to the highway, hang a left, drive a mile, turn left down the lane, and then back as far as your place is off the highway. But I jumped the fences and walked over tonight. Needed the exercise after Momma's supper."

I would shoot you between the eyes if you called me Momma. When I get a husband, even when I have kids, he's not calling me Momma, she thought.

He noticed the scowl on her face. Lord, what did I say wrong?

"How many fences?" she asked.

"Well, you leave the backyard fence but it's got a gate. Then the corral fence but it's got a gate too. After that there's the rail fence out into the horse pasture, but there's a stile over it, and then your fence. So I suppose I only actually jumped one fence." He grinned.

That grin was flirting. If he was her husband he'd be in the doghouse with Hooter for looking at another woman the way he was staring at her. Liz couldn't remember when she didn't work at the carnival in some capacity or another. And she'd seen men walking down the midway with their arm around one woman and eyeing another just like Raylen was doing.

Raylen saw the disgusted look cross her face and stood up so fast that Blister rolled down into the chair. "I came to invite you to Sunday dinner tomorrow. We do the big family thing on Sunday, and Grandma wants to have music." His palms were sweaty, and high color stung his neck.

She pointed. "One mile straight across there?"

"That's right. At noon. My sisters, Gemma and Colleen, will be there and my brother, Dewar. My other brother, Rye, and his wife and baby daughter, Rachel, live over in Terral, right across the river and they'll be coming too. And of course Grandma and Grandpa and Momma and Daddy."

Liz's dark eyebrows knit together in a frown. Did he live with his mother and father?

Well, you lived with your mother until yesterday, so don't be casting stones! Aunt Tressa's gravelly voice whispered so close that she turned to make sure she wasn't in the room.

"I'd love to come to dinner. At noon? Can I bring something? What's your wife's name?" she blurted out and

wished she could cram the words right back in her mouth. God, that sounded so tacky.

"Wife?" he stammered.

"You didn't mention your wife's name. Rye, your brother, is married to Austin. Are any of the rest of you married?" She might as well be hung for a full-fledged sheep as a little bitty lamb. She'd opened the can of worms. She might as well let them all out to wiggle.

"Hell, no! I wouldn't be over here askin' you to dinner if I was married. That wouldn't be right." The words shot out of his mouth like cannonball.

She cocked her head to one side. Were all the women in Ringgold, Texas, blind? Raylen filled out those Wranglers right well, and his biceps strained the seams on his Western-cut, plaid shirt. How in the devil had he outrun all the women?

"Do you have a husband?" he asked bluntly.

It was her turn to blush and shake her head emphatically. "Carnies aren't the marryin' type."

"Carnies?" He wondered if that was a family name.

"That's right. You sure I can't bring something?"

"We plan on music." He smiled. "If you play an instrument bring it along. If not, just bring a healthy appetite."

She walked him to the door. He turned and looked down into her eyes and felt himself falling. She moistened her full lips with the tip of her tongue and he leaned in to kiss her then jerked back.

Liz wanted that kiss and felt cheated, then cheap. A woman didn't let a man kiss her just because he asked her to Sunday dinner. She might be a carnie, but she wasn't trashy. She took a step back and looked over her shoulder at the dog and cat.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," she said hoarsely.

He cleared his throat and opened the screen door. "Be lookin' for you. Want me to drive over and get you?" he asked awkwardly.

"No, I'd either walk or bring my own truck," she said just as stiffly.

"Okay, then. Good night, Liz."

"Night, Raylen." His name slipped off her tongue entirely too easy, and he did smell good and look good and that kiss would have been so, so good.

She plopped down in the recliner, and Hooter laid his head in her lap. Blister moved from the back of the chair to the arm and purred. The remnants of Raylen's shaving lotion surrounded her.

"I'd give you each a big T-bone if you could talk and tell me more about Raylen."

She dug her cell phone out of her purse and punched in the speed dial for her uncle. After five rings she was about to hang up when she heard his voice.

"Uncle Haskell. I'm here and I'm unpacked and I was so tickled to see Hooter and Blister. Do I really get to keep them? I've already made up my mind. I'm staying on the property and I promise I'll spoil them even worse than you did."

"Whoa, girl. Slow down," Haskell said. "Yes, you can keep Hooter and Blister. They wouldn't be happy anywhere but right there and I know you'll spoil them. But you haven't been there long enough to make up your mind, so you have to stay until March when the carnival pulls out of here before I sign it over to you legally. I told Raylen to water and feed Hooter and Blister. I guess he did?"

"Yes, he was in the house when I got here. He went home but he came back and invited me to the O'Donnell's for Sunday dinner. He said they're going to have music," Liz said.

"You'll enjoy that. That Raylen and Dewar both are good men, Lizelle. Take your fiddle and enjoy the day."

"Are you settling in out there?" Liz asked. It hadn't occurred to her in the flurry of excitement that her uncle might not be satisfied in Claude and might want to come back to Ringgold.

"Yes, I am. Poppa and I are getting along pretty good. I'm still unpacking my books, but we're getting a few boxes done each day. Poppa borrowed some yesterday. I may make a reader of him yet. He's anxious for Marva Jo and Tressa to get here though. He loves revamping the wagons every winter."

"I'm glad you are there, Uncle Haskell. He gets lonely. I promised Hooter and Blister some quality family time so I'm going to hang up and visit with them," Liz said.

"I'll be looking for reports at least once a week," Haskell said.

"You got ?em. Good night," Liz said.

Did that mean she could ask questions about Raylen once a week as well as give her uncle a report?

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