

The Power of Love

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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## Prologue

Even in the dim lamplight, Nilla's blonde coat shone like the sun. Annie Cavanaugh smirked to herself. That's what two hours of grooming in the middle of the night will do for you, she thought sarcastically as she ran the currycomb over the patient horse's haunches for the nine-hundredth time that night. Her mane and tail were loosely plaited, hooves cleaned...she was ready for the show ring.

All dressed up and nowhere to go. I can sympathize with that, Annie thought, frowning immediately. Except for the dressed up part. She looked down at one of her two pair of half dead jeans – both were more holes than jeans at this point. Everything in life seemed to come down to money, and she was damned sick and tired of living, breathing, and eating money problems.

Annie could feel her stomach start to churn with the nausea that had become a constant companion of late. Bad thought, bad, bad thought, she chided herself. She had come out here to forget her woes. Animals had always had that magic ability to soothe her, even when she was a child. Now all grown up, she frankly preferred their company to that of most people beyond a select group of female friends.

Men were ranked somewhere down there next to money as bad business, as far as she was concerned, despite the fact that she was only thirty-eight and hardly ready to be put out to pasture. It wasn't as if they were knocking down her door, anyway. Hugh had run out on her – choosing a piece of vapid, twenty-five-year-old arm candy over someone who smelled like dirt and cows.

Annie wasn't at all sure she could blame him, but at times, she did, anyway. It had been over seven years, but the tears arrived on cue just the same. Not that she missed him, much, but ranch life was hard and largely isolated, and it had been nice to know that someone – who was supposed to be deeply committed to her – was lying just on the other side of grandma's handmade quilt.

But, in retrospect, she should never have married him. When her father died suddenly and she had inherited the mortgaged-to-the-hilt ranch, where he had barely been able to eke out a living, the ranch became the only thing she saw. The ranch was one of the few things in life that meant anything to her, besides her myriad dogs, cats, and horses. It even meant more than her sister and her niece and nephew, who lived back East. She certainly loved the Circle C more than she loved any Johnny-come-lately husband. The C had been there for her during her parents' nasty fights, when the kids at school had teased her, and when there wasn't enough money to buy her a decent dress to wear to graduation.

It was her home, and it meant everything to her – apparently, even more than her husband did. Just before he had walked out that crooked, squeaky screen door, Hugh said the most calculatedly hurtful thing he could as a parting shot, his face a mask of snide cruelty. "I ain't gonna miss you one bit, Annie. It was like making love to a corpse."

It had hurt that she hadn't been enough of a woman to keep him, but she had thrown all of her energy into the ranch, and, as the pain of his desertion numbed over time, she was slowly working her way into the black.

But there was never enough money for anything. Never enough hands, never enough time. She was working herself into the ground; Regan, her ancient foreman, had been fond of telling

her, "You should be sitting at home having babies." He'd wheeze, despite how many times she'd lectured him on his antiquated notions.

Now, even Regan was gone. He'd had to fly down to Florida to take care of his sister, who was even more ancient than he was. He had hated to leave, Annie knew. He was more of a father to her than her own had been, by a long shot, and they both had more than a tear in their eye when they hugged hard and parted.

So she'd had to put an ad in the local paper. Frankly, she didn't hold out much hope. If she was lucky, she might get a drifter to help for a while, but Annie had no delusions that anyone could work the miracle she needed. She put the brush she'd switched to down and almost swore she heard the horse give a sigh of relief. It was a wonder the poor thing wasn't bald by now.

Annie paused at the barn doors that were slightly askew, careful not to lean on them. She needed to put them back on track, but that little chore was so far down the list, they were likely to fall off before she got to them. She took a deep breath, full of horse and hay and the ancient, acrid sweetness of an old barn, letting it fill her lungs like a form of organic aromatherapy, and all the money and time worries that had plagued her brain eased out of it to dissipate into the pre-dawn air.

She started back towards the house for a cup of coffee and a cigarette that she wasn't supposed to have, according to her doctor and Regan and the Surgeon General. Inside the big, warm kitchen, Annie passed the blinking answering machine. She frowned, knowing that there had been no messages when she went to bed last night. So far, a whopping zero candidates had responded to her ad, but a call at five in the morning?

A worried, niggling thought flashed into her head, and she wondered if Regan was all right. Annie quickly pushed the play button and listened avidly for the sound of his voice.

But it certainly wasn't Regan. The man who owned that voice should be very gainfully employed at a phone sex operation. The deep, husky timbre reached out and slipped insidiously into her brain. She'd turned away from the phone when she'd realized who it wasn't, but as she got the stuff together to make a short pot for herself, his words seeped from her ears down over her breasts; her nipples blooming into stiff, painful peaks that chafed against the inside of her dingy white bra.

"You advertised for a ranch hand. I'm applying. Call me." He left his phone number.

It was one heavy breath away from being an obscene phone call, as far as she was concerned. Dear God, if that was what he sounded like, what must he look like? Annie snorted, leaning against the counter while the coffee perked. Probably an unflattering cross between Quasimodo and Dilbert, she thought unkindly.

She had to admit, though, she liked his spunk, calling at this ungodly hour. Of course, in ranch country, early was never early enough. Since she knew he was up by the timestamp on the message, she grabbed the phone and punched in his number. There was no sense putting it off. The sooner she could get some help, the better.

"Hullo?" It sounded like he'd fallen back asleep.

The blood he'd ignited with his innocently sexy phone message pooled in the warm cradle of her loins and lay there, tingling madly. She had to clear her throat and shake her head, trying to dispel those unfamiliar, and wholly unwanted, feelings. "I'm calling from the Circle C. You left a message that you're interested in working for me?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone. Annie didn't like it, and she liked his response even less. "You?"

Her eyebrow rose reflexively. She was quite used to the chauvinistic prejudices that still existed regarding women running a ranch. It just wasn't done.

Except by her.

"Yes, me. Do you have a problem with the idea of working for a woman?" she asked, unable to keep the edge from her tone that clearly said he was a Neanderthal if he did.

"Don't think so. Just didn't expect a woman."

Annie decided to keep things on as businesslike a level as she could, despite her throbbing body. "Have you worked on a ranch before?"

"No."

Oh, lovely. He was going to be a big help. "What kind of work have you done?"

"Computers."

She revised her previous opinion. He was, apparently, a combination of Quasimodo and a ninety-eight-pound weakling geek. Marvelous. "Well, Mr. – Mr. –"

"Rideout."

"Mr. Rideout. This is a very physical position, and it does require a certain amount of knowledge –"

"I'll learn."

This was like pulling teeth, and it really wasn't getting her anywhere. She couldn't hire him. He had no experience. She didn't need to continue to do the majority of the work around here and babysit a tenderfoot. That would be adding to her workload, not alleviating it.

He did sound quite sure of himself, very confident and downright uncomfortably masculine. But Annie needed someone who was going to dive right in and do a lot of heavy stuff that she simply couldn't do. She'd been relying on help from her neighbor, Kaz Ballentine, but he had his own huge and grossly successful spread. She couldn't continue to expect him to come over and do what she had to leave undone, scolding and chiding her all the way, about what she had to do.

Kaz was a throwback, who made absolutely no apologies for his antiquated attitudes towards women. His wife, Callie, was one of the few people from her high school class whom Annie still kept in contact with, and she was the first to roll her eyes at her husband when he attempted to lay down the law with her about something, until he got that look.

Their kind of love was something that, when she awoke in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep, Annie aspired to. They were blatantly, completely and totally in love with each other and made no bones about it. Kaz, who was as macho and masculine as anyone would ever see, melted with each glance at his tiny wife, whom he did his darndest to overprotect. He thought the sun rose and set in Callie's smile, and he didn't much care who knew it.

"Well?"

His insistent tone jarred her out of her reverie. "Uh, I'm sorry, Mr. Rideout, but I really do need someone with experience."

"What I lack in experience I can make up for in determination. I learn quickly, and I'm very strong."

She could certainly use the very strong part of that description, but she didn't think it would be enough. "I'm sorry. If I were a little better off, I could take you on and train you."

"I understand. Thank you."

Click.

And that was it. No more tingle, no more throbbing. Back to being dead.

She hung up the phone reluctantly, then drank a huge mug of coffee, donned a disreputable hat and holey gloves and set out for a day full o' bovine fun and frolic.  
Yee haw.

# Chapter One

Faith, Texas was everyone's picture of a small town – slowly dying Main Street, giant blight of a Wal-mart just on its outskirts, two greasy spoons and a post office, and half of a volunteer fire department building, which only got built in the squad's spare time.

Quinn Rideout lay flat on his back in the dingy room he'd rented at Sadie's Boarding House. He would have thought that boarding houses had gone out of style long ago, but apparently, not a lot changed in small town Texas unless it absolutely had to, and he bet that Sadie had a hard time making the mortgage without taking in the occasional weary traveler.

It was all right, as such places go. He twitched a little, adjusting himself carefully. He didn't really fit on the tiny twin bed, and, at first, he'd had some concerns about whether or not it would even hold him, but despite the constant groaning from the ancient springs, it seemed to be surviving, so far.

The rest of the small room was filled – literally, floor to ten-foot crown molded ceiling – with computer innards. Hard drives, empty shells of towers he had already harvested from, cd-rw drives, and even the occasional five and a quarter floppy drive – the big ones that everyone had thought would be big enough to store anything anyone would ever need on a computer. As Bill Gates had once famously said, "640k ought to be big enough for anyone."

Not quite anymore.

The nagging pain in his leg told him that he needed to change his position completely, which wasn't easy. At any point during the process of arranging his broken parts, he expected to become up close and personal with Sadie's spotlessly clean floor. At least on his side, though, his shoulders wouldn't hang off the side of the bed.

The hinges held, and he finally settled onto his bad side. His left leg. A horrific car accident, when he was much younger, had pretty much crumpled it like tin foil, and no one seemed to be able to do much about it, despite the current conventional wisdom that preached about the miracles of modern medicine.

Said miracles had been few and far between for him, he thought absently, with an unusual degree of depression as his fingers absently rubbed another of the souvenirs from the accident – a long, unsightly scar that stretched raggedly from the corner of his right eye down to just past his jaw. It had been created when a piece of the windshield had been sheared off and imbedded itself into the side of his face. He'd been lucky he hadn't lost that eye or any cognitive abilities.

Lucky. Yep. That was him. Lucky.

Even after years of physical therapy, he still walked with a considerable limp, but he never let it hamper him in any way. He rock climbed, he skied, he had a black belt in karate, and he made horrible choices in women. There were no protections against that for gimps, apparently.

Hannah had gotten it all in the divorce – the house, the car, even their dog. Not that he'd wanted much. Quinn had never needed to have things – possessions – around him. As long as he had his computers and a car, he was good to go. That was one of the irreconcilable problems they'd had. The closer he came to success "tinkering" – as she'd derisively termed it – with his computers, the less attention he was able...no...willing, in Hannah's case, he admitted to himself, to spend on her.



The other problem – as far as Hannah saw it – was that he flatly refused to do anything about the scar on his face. She'd supposedly fallen in love with him – not his face – but the longer they were together, the more she nagged him incessantly to have plastic surgery. Apparently, love was nowhere near as blind as it was purported to be.

But Quinn wasn't in the least bothered by the ruddy red scar, and he refused to go under the knife for a purely cosmetic reason. He was no Pierce Brosnan before the accident, and no amount of plastic surgery was going to make him into one. If others didn't like it – including his dear wife – they could kiss his butt.

Granted, it had been a long while since he had wanted to be with Hannah. Hindsight being twenty-twenty, he should never have married her in the first place, but occasionally, even he, the quintessential loner, wanted some sort of human contact. But she was everything he wasn't, a social climber, concerned with material possessions that he couldn't provide...yet.

If he were ever able to complete what he was working on and get it sold, he would be able to buy and sell Hannah Mitchell Rideout.

But that was a big if.

He sat up suddenly, reaching for the folded and marked want ads, making a big red "x" through the Circle C's ad and moving on to the next one.

\* \* \*

It was well past ten that night before Annie made it back to the house, dragging herself in to flop dejectedly onto a kitchen chair, tears nearly overcoming her. Regan had left a week ago, and she'd tried to do as much as she could by herself, but the sheer volume of work – most of which she physically couldn't do – was starting to overwhelm her. She was beat, physically and emotionally. She'd spent all day moving cattle, and every muscle she owned hurt. She'd been stepped on, knocked down, and nearly dragged. If Nilla hadn't been so well trained, she would have ended up dead a thousand ways from Sunday today.

And this was just an average run of the mill day on a ranch.

Kaz had gotten her on her cell and begged off coming over tonight to help her with the fencing. All she could do was thank him profusely for what he'd already done for her. He had no obligation to keep coming over here, although she knew he would, as much as he could.

She needed about five more hands and about a half a million dollars.

She needed a miracle, and there were none in the offing, she knew.

Instead, she got up, her bones and muscles creaking almost as loudly as the chair, and looked at the answering machine. No light. No one else had responded to her ad. As she replayed the message that intriguing Mr. Rideout had left, Annie tapped her front tooth with a broken fingernail. Some help would be better than none, at this point.

Sighing, she picked up the phone and called him back, hoping that he hadn't found something else in the meantime.

He hadn't, and he agreed to come meet her very early tomorrow morning. If he was as strong as he implied, she intended to hire him on the spot.

Annie slept right through the shrieking of her alarm, probably because she'd been up half the night the night before. She stumbled down to the kitchen and put the pot on then turned to go back upstairs to dress as was her habit, but then a sound caught her attention. It was the unmistakable sound of a hammer meeting wood.

Without another thought beyond the concern that someone might be trying to destroy something on her property, despite how highly unlikely that was, Annie ran out into the yard. A strange man was on a ladder in front of the barn, fixing the doors.

Completely disregarding her state of undress, which was worse than it might have been, considering the spots on her gown that were nearly see-through, she marched up to stand at the bottom of the ladder. "Excuse me! Excuse me! Just what in the hell do you think you're doing?"

He went on, banging several more nails into the door without acknowledging her in the least.

"Come down here, right now!"

He continued to futz with the door for another few minutes, and then, finally, he descended to tip his hat at her sharply, without so much as looking at her, then collect the ladder and move it to the other side.

Annie attempted unsuccessfully to keep her temper at bay. "Mr. Rideout, I'd like you to come down here, please, so that I can speak to you."

"In a minute."

Annie nearly bit her tongue clean through before he deigned to join her on the ground again. But she had to admit that at least when he'd finished, the doors slid easily open and closed, and it was going to be nice not to have to worry when one of them was going to come crashing down on her—or an animal's—head.

When he finally stood in front of her, she almost wished he'd stayed on the ladder. He was a huge man whose shoulders completely blotted out every bit of the morning sun. He must have been at least six-six or so, with bulging arms and thighs that were nearly as wide as her waist.

She hadn't counted on him being so big or feeling so small because of it. Annie had worked around men most of her life, but she had never seen one as big as he was. It served to remind her how vulnerable she was as a woman living alone and made her more wary than she might have been.

Annie extended her hand to him. "I'm Annie Cavangaugh, Mr. Rideout."

"Quinn." He gingerly shook just the ends of her fingers, as if he was afraid of hurting the rest of her small hand, his eyes nailing themselves to her as surely as he'd nailed the doors.

She couldn't help but wonder where he'd gotten that nasty scar. Even without it, though, he'd never have been handsome. He was too rough looking. "Quinn. Thank you for fixing them. They've been something I just couldn't get to."

"S'okay."

He moved back towards his truck, and she noticed his pronounced limp. Something had happened to him somewhere along the line that had taken quite a toll on his body. Annie wished she could ask him about it, but that would have been too impolite, especially on essentially no acquaintance. She wondered if that limp would hinder his job performance, and then, suddenly, for no particular reason, her mind conjured up the question of how that limp might affect his lovemaking, and she couldn't squelch the thought.

As a result, when he came to stand in front of her, his brow furrowed. "You all right? You're all red."

Annie tried to take herself firmly in hand, hoping it would make her blush dissipate more quickly. "I'm fine, thank you."

She showed him around the ranch and told him what she expected of the man she hired, and he had no problems keeping up with her. Both legs were disgustingly long, and, in fact, she was the one who had to jog trot next to him, even with the limp. "Can you ride?"

He nodded, scanning the dilapidated buildings and corrals with a critical eye. "Well enough."

"I couldn't pay much at first. As I mentioned in the ad, this is only a temporary position until my foreman gets back."

"Whatever you can pay is fine. But do you know of a place to stay? I'm in the boarding house right now, but I don't really have enough room."

She had been going to offer the new hand room and board in the house, after she'd had Kaz vet him... But with this man, she wasn't at all sure.

Annie didn't want to admit it, but he stirred something in her that had been long dormant. And she'd prefer that it stayed that way. There was a dichotomy about the way he made her feel. At once, very vulnerable and soft but, also, somehow cared for, as if she somehow knew that he'd only ever use all that strength to help her. But the truth was that she knew nothing of the sort about him, and it was patently ridiculous of her to feel this way. She was doing her best to fight it, but it was insidious.

"You can start immediately, and I have rooms available here, but I have to do a bit of a background check." The sight of him frowning down on her like that was truly fearsome.

"Good. Investigate all you like. I'll answer anything you ask. A woman alone can't take any chances."

He followed her into the house and sat down at her kitchen table to fill out a small questionnaire she had, and even that big kitchen seemed too small for him. He dwarfed the chair he was sitting on, and Annie was sure it was going to break out from under him.

"I put down more than you asked." He handed her the form as she flitted about the kitchen, trying to do anything but notice the giant at the table. "And I listed about ten references."

"Thank you."

Quinn turned the brim of his hat in his hands nervously. "I'll work hard for you, Ms. Cavanaugh. You'll never regret hiring me; I can assure you of that."

Annie nodded, her gaze settling anywhere but at him. "Thank you."

Quinn saw how she avoided looking at him and grimaced. With most people, he didn't give a damn what they thought. But this feisty little woman, who'd been valiantly trying to do a man's job for who knows how long, touched him somehow, and he'd hoped that she could look past his face. But if she couldn't, she couldn't. He was grateful to have the job.

Annie watched him walk out into the yard, her hands clenched into fists at her side.

It was only then that she remembered she was still in her gown.