

How to Stir Up a Ranch

By

Misty Malone

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Chapter One

Wyoming, 1890

Dawson Hamilton was dirty, sweaty, and exhausted, but smiling ear to ear as he headed for the house. His foreman, Joe Granger, followed right behind him, just as dirty, sweaty, and exhausted, and also smiling. "Branding went really well this year, Dawson," Joe said as he thumped his young boss on the shoulder.

"It did," Dawson agreed, "and I want to thank you for that."

"No need to thank me; I was just doing my job. You did yours really well this year, too. You're stepping into the role of ranch owner well."

Dawson stopped walking and looked at his foreman as he thought back. "You know, I grew up on this ranch and worked with Pa my whole life, and you were here for most of it. I thought I knew pretty much everything there was to know about ranching, until Pa died. Then I found out just how much I didn't know."

"Your pa was grooming you to take over this ranch some day, Dawson, but he had no idea you'd be doing it so soon. He wanted you to know how to do everything on the ranch, and he always said the best way to do that is to learn from the bottom up. That's why he started you off as one of the hands. Then he had you and me working together for two years so you could take over as foreman when I retired. Once he was sure you could do that, he was just beginning to show you the things he always handled himself. That left a lot of things for you to learn in a real big hurry."

Dawson nodded. "It sure did. I don't know where I'd be now if it weren't for

you, Joe. You've stepped in there and taught me everything I hadn't learned yet."

"Your pa planned on teaching it all to you. He just thought he'd have years to do it. But you're picking it all up quickly. He'd be proud of you right now."

"I hope he would. He'd be proud of you, too, for helping me get to this place. The branding went well this year, much better than last year. I feel like I'm finally settling in as the owner of this ranch, thanks to you. Together I think we're going to be able to keep it going."

"I believe so, too, Dawson. You're doing a fine job."

"It is such a relief that things are finally settling down and running smoothly."

They reached the house, both tired and hungry. They were met at the door by Stella, Dawson's housekeeper and cook, who was shaking her head. "Neither one of you men are coming in my kitchen until you go clean up a little bit at the well. I will bring you towels." She shut the door and disappeared.

Dawson looked at his foreman and smiled. "I'd say we better start pumping some water and wash up a bit."

"Only if we want to eat," Joe said with a chuckle. They got to the pump and both men smiled again when they saw the bar of lye soap setting by the bucket of water.

They were finishing up as Stella came out of the house and handed them each a towel. "Much better," she said. "Now you can come in and sit down in the dining room. Supper is ready and I'll bring it right in."

As soon as they started eating, Joe looked over at his younger boss. At only twenty-six-years-old, Dawson really was doing a good job of running what was a large ranch; quite a daunting task. He wasn't anxious to tell him the news he'd received, but he knew he had to. "Dawson, I'd like to go back to what we were talking about on the way in here."

Dawson stopped eating and looked over at Joe. He knew he had something on his mind. "Okay, go ahead."

"When you said things are starting to settle down, I agree. I just hope they stay that way."

"Why wouldn't they? What are you trying to tell me, Joe?" A thought crossed his mind, and he put his fork down, concerned. "When Landon came back from town with the supplies I sent him to get, he said he had a letter for you. Does this have something to do with that letter? Is everything okay?"

"It is about the letter, yes. My brother died, and his daughter, Jenna Mae, is on her way out here. I'm the only family she has."

"I'm sorry to hear about your brother, Joe. I didn't know you had a brother. I don't remember hearing you talk about him."

"We weren't real close. We have the same Pa, but different mothers. My mother died, and it was just me and Pa until I was about full-grown. Then Pa married again, and she was younger than him. Pa was pretty young when I was born, and his new wife was only four or five years older than me. She never felt comfortable having a son nearly as old as she was, so when she became with child, I left. I didn't want to be in their way of starting a new life. I had finished school, up through the eighth grade the year before, and had been helping Pa on the farm. I'd heard of big ranches starting up out here in Wyoming and was intrigued, so I came out and got hired on as a hand."

"So you left home before your brother was born?"

"I did. I've gone home a couple times, so I met him, but we never were like brothers. When Pa died, I went back for the funeral, and he left me half of the farm in his will, so I had to decide what to do with that before I come back. We got to know each other a little better that visit, and since then we've exchanged a few letters back and forth over the years and kept up with each other a little bit. I knew

he had a little girl, Jenna Mae, but I've only seen her one time. I knew her Mama died and he was raising her himself."

"How old is she?"

Joe took several moments to think before answering. "I don't rightly know for sure, and the letter didn't say. She was just a little bitty thing, barely walking the last time I saw her, but I can't really remember when that was. It's probably been ten years ago by now, so I'm guessing she's probably about twelve. Hell, I just can't remember when I did see them last. It seems to me it's been about ten years, but you know how time is; it may have been longer than that, so she might be fourteen by now. I just don't know."

"Well, it doesn't really matter," Dawson said. "You've got an extra bedroom in the foreman's cabin. Is there a bed in there, or do we need to get one?"

"No, there's a new bed in there. I don't know that it's ever been used. Your daddy had the cabin all furnished, fixed up real nice when I moved in, so that bed should still be really good. There's a nice chest of drawers in there she can put her clothes in, too, and some pegs on the one wall for her dresses. The letter said John had been sick for a spell, so I wonder if she's got all the clothes she needs. Kids grow pretty fast, and if he's been sick, her clothes might be getting small."

"When she gets here, we'll find out what she needs. We'll get her in the school if she hasn't finished yet, and we can take her shopping in town. The Mercantile has some clothes already made, and Mrs. Marsh has the dressmaker's shop. We can take her there and have some dresses made for her."

Stella came in with a pie for dessert. "Who are you taking to Mrs. Marsh for some dresses? Has one of you boys got a girl you haven't told me about?"

"No, ma'am," Dawson quickly answered with a big grin. "I know better than to try to keep any secrets from you."

"Smart boy," Stella said with a smile of her own.

"Joe's brother died and his niece is coming to stay with him. Her pa's been sick, so we thought she may need some bigger clothes when she gets here."

Stella's eyes lit up. "Oh, we're going to have a little girl on the ranch?"

"We're going to have a girl on the ranch," Joe confirmed. "I don't know how small she is, though, because I can't remember when she was born. I'm guessing she's about twelve or fourteen, but I admit I don't really know."

"Oh, it doesn't matter how old she is. It'll be nice having another female around. When Jack was one of the hands here, it was nice. He was married, and his wife and I used to visit some. I helped her decorate the little cabin they had built for them, and we'd get together for tea and cookies at least once a week. I miss having another lady around. If she's fourteen, she'll grow up soon enough. I wonder if she can cook?"

"I have no idea," Joe offered, "but I'll bet you could teach her, if she can't."

"Oh, I'd love to teach her," Stella said sincerely.

"Her mama died when she was pretty little," Joe said. "I'm thinking there may be a lot of things you could teach her, if you wouldn't mind."

"I wouldn't mind at all. It'll be fun having her here. If she's twelve she's probably still in school. If she's fourteen she's probably done with school and we'll have more time to work on learning how to cook and sew."

"The more I'm thinking about it, I'll bet she is fourteen by now. He said in one of his letters a few years ago that she was learning to ride a horse and refused to sit sidesaddle. He said she had a mind of her own and there was no changing her mind once she'd decided on something."

"So she's stubborn?" Dawson said with a smile.

"Sounded like it," Joe admitted. "But that was several years ago, so if she was learning how to ride horses then, I'll bet she's fourteen by now. Maybe even a little older."

"We'll find out when she gets here," Dawson said. "It doesn't really matter how old she is. We'll do what we can to make her feel welcome."

"Absolutely," Stella agreed.

"Thank you, both of you," Joe said. "I just worry about things changing around here. You're right, Dawson; things have settled down around here and it's kind of nice. I hope she doesn't stir things up."

"I wouldn't worry about that, Joe. How much trouble could one young lady cause on a ranch?"

Dawson was oblivious to what he'd said, but hearing his words, Stella and Joe seemed suddenly concerned. They looked at each other and frowned. "One young lady could conceivably cause all kinds of trouble on a ranch," Joe said. "Especially if she's older than I'm thinking, and stubborn."

"Or a real pretty young lady who likes to tease men," Stella added.

Dawson's eyes opened wider as he realized what they were saying. "We'll just have to make sure she knows the rules from the start," he said. Joe and Stella nodded in agreement, but all three were deep in thought.

They had three days before she was to arrive on the stagecoach, and they spent much of that time getting prepared and talking. They made sure her bedroom at Joe's cabin was ready, and talked about rules they'd have to be sure she understood. If she was fourteen, or even possibly older, it was important that she not tease the ranch hands. Stella volunteered to have her stay at the main house during the day. She could teach her to cook and sew if she didn't already know, and Dawson's parents had a well-furnished library, and Dawson and Stella would encourage her to take advantage of the books.

Joe was getting more nervous as the big day approached. "I've never been a parent or guardian, and I'm worried," he confided one day to Dawson. "I don't know what all I'll need to do. What if I can't do it?"

"I'm not the right person to ask about parenting, but Stella and I will be here to help. I have no experience, but Stella does. She raised two sons and two daughters, so we'll all just have to listen to what she says and does. She'll be a big help, I'm sure. She's looking forward to having another girl to take under her wing."

"I don't know what I'd do without you two, Dawson."

"Hey, we're a family here on this ranch. We'll all do fine."

When the big day arrived, Dawson got the men started on projects that would keep them busy all day. He hitched the wagon his dad had made several years ago for just such an occasion. He'd taken a wagon and added an extra bench seat directly behind the first, so he could take his wife and Dawson and his two sisters to town with him when he went to get supplies. He'd make a fun day out of it, stopping for a picnic lunch somewhere, and eating supper at the restaurant in town before going home. Dawson had loved those special outings, and remembered them fondly whenever he used the wagon.

Today it would be useful, as he planned on going along with Joe, so he could welcome her to the ranch. He'd also asked Stella to go with them, hoping another lady would make her feel more comfortable. Joe was special to Dawson, and he wanted to do everything he could to let him know his niece was welcome at the ranch, and he and Stella would be there to help him with her. He assumed she'd have a couple trunks of clothes, so they'd need the wagon instead of the buggy.

They made it to town, everyone anxious to meet the new arrival, and see how old she was. Joe was extremely nervous. He didn't like the idea of her traveling alone, no matter how old she may be. When they got to town, they found out the stage was running late, which didn't help his nerves any. They went to the mercantile and got the supplies Dawson needed and the staples Stella wanted. With Dawson's enthusiastic approval, she splurged and got a few special items, like

chocolate to make a cake.

They spent some time browsing, seeing what sorts of things were available, in case Jenna Mae needed some things right away. If she said she could use some bigger clothes, they'd try to get her some before going home.

They went back outside to wait for the stagecoach, and Joe heaved a sigh of relief when he saw it approaching. At least she'd made it here safely.

They watched as the driver helped an older couple down the steps, then reached in to help a lovely young lady down. They were waiting for him to help a younger girl down, when they heard the older couple talking to the young lady that had just disembarked. "It was nice to meet you, Miss Granger," the man said. "I hope you like living in this part of the country."

"Thank you so much for the wonderful company on the way here," the young lady responded. "I hope you enjoy your visit with your family."

"Thank you, dear," the lady said as they gave each other a hug.

Joe looked the lady over carefully, not believing his eyes. This was certainly no fourteen-year-old. He stepped forward. "Jenna Mae?"

She smiled and looked Joe up and down. "Uncle Joe?"

Stella was shocked. She was expecting a scared, fourteen-year-old girl, but she guessed Jenna Mae to be around twenty, and was a lovely, confident lady. She had dark brown hair that had streaks of lighter brown woven in that seemed to catch the sun. Her beautiful amber eyes seemed to sparkle when she smiled, and although she was rather small, she was guessing slightly over five feet tall, she looked confident, not too timid. She glanced over at Dawson, and had to fight back a chuckle. He had obviously noticed the natural beauty their new ranch resident possessed.

Joe had taken her into his arms for a welcoming hug, but Stella could easily see the look of surprise on his face, as well. It had obviously been a few more years

than he remembered since he'd seen his niece.

Joe cleared his throat and turned his niece toward the two standing and watching, their mouths open. "Jenna Mae, this is Dawson Hamilton. He owns the ranch you'll be living on, and this is Stella. She runs his house."

Stella was the first to find her voice. "Welcome to The Circle H, Jenna Mae. If there's anything we can do to help you settle in, please let us know."

"It's nice to meet you, Jenna Mae," Dawson said, holding out his hand, which she reached out and shook. Her handshake surprised him a bit. He was expecting a weak handshake from such a small lady, but it was pretty firm. "Welcome to the ranch. If you'll show us which trunks are yours, we'll get them loaded on the wagon."

"Thank you," she said with a smile. "I don't have a lot. It all fit in one trunk and my valise. It's this one over here." She pointed to the smallest trunk on the platform.

Dawson was a little startled. The trunk was awfully small to hold everything a young lady owned. He didn't want to upset her by asking, though, and it really wasn't any of his business anyway, so he simply picked it up and headed for the wagon.

"I'll help you carry it, Dawson," Joe said, running up to him.

"It's not that heavy, Joe, I've got it."

"We may as well follow them over," Stella said. "There aren't a lot of ladies on the ranch, so we'll have to kind of stick together. Feel free to come up to the main house anytime. It's not very often I can't take a break for a cup of tea and a cookie. I'll be happy to do what I can to make you feel at home. That includes answering any questions you may have. Have you ever lived on a ranch before?"

Jenna Mae actually giggled. "No. I think it sounds fun, though."

They'd reached the wagon by then, and Dawson watched as Joe started to lift

her into the wagon. He turned to the pretty little lady. "I'm sure you're tired of riding. Why don't we all go get some dinner before we head to the ranch? It'll give you a little time to stretch your legs a bit."

"Dinner? Don't you mean lunch?"

"Out west here, especially on a ranch, we have breakfast, dinner and supper. I know in the cities back east they call them something different, but it's still three meals a day."

"Oh, okay," she said easily. "It may take me a little time to get used to some of the changes I'm sure I'll find out here, but I'll try. I'm used to breakfast, lunch and dinner."

"I'm sure you will find some things that are different here," Dawson said. "Where have you been living? I don't believe Joe mentioned where you and your father resided."

She paused just a moment and had a lost look on her face, but it quickly disappeared. "Actually, we moved around quite a bit." She gave Dawson a big smile that seemed to light up her face. "We never lived on a ranch, though, and I'm looking forward to that. Do you have horses I could ride?"

"We certainly do have horses, and you're welcome to ride them once I know you're capable. Do you like to ride?"

"I love to ride. You don't have to worry about my ability to ride a horse. I've been riding for years."

"Good. I'll take you out sometime in the next day or two so I can see that for myself. Assuming you're a talented rider, I'll show you an area on the ranch you can explore while you're becoming familiar with the ranch."

They had begun walking toward the restaurant in town, but she stopped and looked at him. "I'm not sure I understand. I thought I'd be able to take a horse and see what the ranch looks like. Are you saying I can't?"

"The ranch is large, and it's easy to get lost. There are also wild animals on parts of it that I wouldn't want you running into. Joe or I can take you out to different parts of the ranch, and as you get familiar with it so I know you won't get lost, I'll give you a larger area to ride."

She looked appalled, and a little upset, as she looked at him. "I don't get lost easily. I have a really good sense of direction, and I can take a gun with me if you're worried about animals."

Dawson's eyebrows rose. "Do you know how to handle a gun?"

"Of course I do. It wouldn't do me any good to take a gun with me if I didn't know what to do with it."

Dawson wasn't the only one surprised by that comment. Joe and Stella raised their eyebrows, too. For just meeting them, she sounded awfully sassy. Joe attempted to smooth the situation over quickly. "In the next day or two you can show Dawson and me what kind of riding skills you have and how you handle a gun. He's just concerned, wants to make sure you'll be safe on his ranch, and I want the same thing. For right now, though, let's get some dinner. I'm hungry."

The change of topic and scenery seemed to do wonders for Jenna Mae's mood. Dawson watched with interest as she was more demure during lunch. She was quiet, but polite. Several people stopped by their table to see who the newcomer to their small town was. Joe or Dawson introduced her to everyone who stopped, and she was warm and friendly toward all of them. He noticed she seemed to be a little flirtatious with young men, and made a mental note to talk to Joe about that. He didn't want her doing anything to encourage his ranch hands.

They all visited on their way back to the ranch after dinner. She seemed happy to be there, anxious to experience life on a ranch, but she didn't want to talk about her father or where they'd lived. She even sidestepped Joe when he asked directly about his brother. "He never did say what he did for a living. All he'd say

is he moved around a lot, doing different things here and there. How did he make a living?"

She was quiet for a moment, but then looked up at him with a smile, which Dawson didn't think looked too genuine. "We did move around a lot. Basically, he did the best he could, doing whatever he could wherever we went."

Stella laid her hand over Jenna Mae's. "I'm sorry you didn't have some stability in your life. It must have been difficult moving around so much."

"It wasn't too bad. We got to see a lot of the country that way," Jenna Mae said. "But I've never even been on a ranch, let alone lived on one. What's it like?"

Dawson knew she was trying to change the subject, but he was okay with that. Something was obviously in her past that she didn't want to think or talk about, and it wasn't any business of his. If he were Joe, though, he'd try to get her to talk about it. It would probably help her get over it and feel better. But for now he was fine with changing the subject, so he offered an answer to her question. "Living on a ranch is never dull. We get up early and work hard, but there's nothing I'd rather do."

"That sums it up really well," Joe agreed.

They talked about what she could expect life to be like living on a ranch during the remainder of their ride home. When they got there, Dawson and Joe carried her trunk and valise to his foreman's cabin, and Dawson and Stella left them to get settled in.

"Remember, feel free to come up to the house to visit any time," Stella said as they left.

When they got to the house, Dawson went to his bedroom to change out of his good clothes. When he came back downstairs, Stella was waiting for him in the kitchen with a cup of coffee. "Have you got a minute before you go out to work?"

"Sure," he said, sitting down at the table and helping himself to one of the

cookies she had sitting out on a plate. "What's on your mind?"

She checked outside first, looking toward Joe's cabin, before sitting down across from him. "Jenna Mae seems nice," she started, "but why do you suppose she wanted to come live with her uncle? I had the impression she was too young to live alone and Joe would be her guardian."

"I did, too," Dawson admitted. "I think that's what Joe thought, as well. To answer your question, I'm not really sure. I've wondered about that myself. If they moved around a lot, he probably didn't have a house anywhere, and she probably doesn't have anywhere that feels like home. No one said anything about money. Maybe her father didn't have anything much, and she doesn't have any means of living alone."

Stella nodded. "That's what I kind of wondered." She paused a few moments, but Dawson could tell she had something else on her mind, so he waited patiently. Finally, after he helped himself to another cookie, she looked up. "Do you suppose she came here to find a husband?"

Dawson's eyes opened wide. "I hadn't thought of that. A ranch isn't usually where you'd go to look for a husband, but I suppose she might take a liking to one of the hands."

"Maybe," Stella conceded. "Or I have a feeling once word gets out that she's staying here, we'll have a steady stream of male callers."

"We might," Dawson admitted. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. For some reason, it bothered him some. "Maybe I better warn Joe about that, so he'll be ready for it."

"Maybe." After another short pause, she brought up what Dawson surmised was probably the main thing on her mind. "Do you suppose she'll be interested in the men? Their cabin is rather close to the bunkhouse. If she sits outside on the porch she's bound to get their attention."

He started nodding his head slowly. "Yeah, I see what you're saying, Stella. She was doing a little flirting with the younger men at the restaurant, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was. I'd just hate to see her distract the men while they're working."

"As would I. I better talk to Joe about that, too." After a moment, he shook his head. "I think Joe was worried about raising a younger girl. Instead, although she's already an adult, he may have his hands just as full. I guess we'll just have to wait and see what happens."

Stella nodded, but looked a bit concerned.