

MAKE ME YOURS



CAROLYN FAULKNER

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



"*W*hat are *you* doing here?"

Nothing she could have said to herself in preparation for this exact moment could ever have really done so.

No amount of time sitting in the car, breathing in those familiar smells, not only of Texas, but of this ranch in particular—horse, cow, heat and the roses that had long since been planted along the edge of the verandah—that only served to remind her of him and make her heart ache in sharp, painful ways it hadn't in a very long while.

Seeing him in the flesh was so much worse than she could have imagined—as if he'd punched her in the stomach with all his considerable might, driving every bit of air from her body—instead of just innocuously opening the back door.

How could she have forgotten just how big he was? How imposing—how he filled the doorway with his presence, folding those massive arms across his chest and staring down at her as if she was a particularly odious bug?

And just when she'd spent the drive from the airport rhapsodizing about being back here again—back to a place she'd been so

familiar with for so long—delighting in noticing that everything was—at the same time—both new and comfortingly the same.

Well, back to what she'd used to think of as home, anyway, although thanks to the man standing in front of her—being deliberately intimidating—she'd spent quite a while, once she'd left it so abruptly, ruthlessly training herself not to think of it that way any longer.

Cate wore her most obsequious smile as she finished hefting her suitcases up the stairs, doing her best to try to bull her way past the biggest, strongest bull on the ranch. "Nice to see you, too, Rome. And you know *exactly* why I'm here."

For a long second, she thought he wasn't going to allow her in—not that she'd put that past him, even in her own mind when she'd played this scene out in all its possible permutations from the moment she'd decided she had to make this trip.

But then he took a small, grudging step back and—forcibly swallowing down her anxiety at being so close to him—she took full advantage, trying to make it through that tiny opening while struggling with her luggage—but struggling even harder at trying her best not to make physical contact with him in any way.

She knew it was petty, knew that she was ceding power over her to him that she truly wouldn't want to, but she couldn't seem to find it in her to ignore the impulse.

And she couldn't even manage to accomplish that, either, although it was through no fault of her own.

Then, when she'd nearly made it, he surprised her by reaching down to relieve her of her burdens, as if he'd suddenly remembered he was as gentleman—something they both knew first hand that he wasn't—his hand brushing hers away as he easily plucked the bags out of her hold.

It was a good thing he had them securely, because when their skin touched, Cate surrendered her valise and suitcase as if she'd been scalded, tucking her hands into her pockets defensively as she entered the big, open kitchen, forcing herself to concentrate on the

changes she encountered here, too, rather than how her hands were tingling—and her traitorous panties dampening—and all because his hand had barely brushed hers.

Setting her pretty floral backpack on the counter, Cate turned slowly around, her eyes missing nothing about the changes that had been made—all of them good. The room still smelled the same—well, not quite as good as it had when his mother—who had been her mother's best friend—had been around. There was no warm, inviting scent of homemade cinnamon rolls or Sunday roast lingering in the air as there would have been then, but it still smelled wonderfully—heartbreakingly—familiar to her. The accoutrements were different—custom cream colored bead board cabinets instead of the just slightly off balance hand-made and painted ones Rome's father had constructed when he'd built this house with his own two hands. No crumbling, missing in spots, slate flooring anymore; instead, it was a beautifully polished bamboo beneath her feet. The ancient, wheezing fridge had been replaced by a computerized stainless steel one that matched all of the other new appliances—including a dishwasher she would have given her still prune-like right hand to have had while she'd lived here.



WHILE SHE WAS TAKING in the differences his hard work had wrought, Rome stood in the exact same spot he'd been in when he'd deliberately forced her to wiggle past him, knowing when he did it that it was a shitty thing to do to her, but already—and as usual around her—his body was ignoring what his mind was screaming at it in favor of its own rampant wants and needs, which, apparently even now, was still contact with her, in any possible manner he could manage it.

He drew a long, deep breath. This was a problem. He couldn't have her here. She would be a complication.

A distraction.

As she always had been.

As Cate was recalling the homey scents the kitchen was usually bathed in, Rome was letting the fresh scent of her wash through his body, feeling himself harden fully against his own will as that familiar ache he'd never quite been able to satisfy since she'd left settled into the deepest pockets of him—into places he hadn't thought of—hadn't felt but the few scant times he'd encountered her on the phone—in almost a decade.

He might have been able to keep his mind occupied—and even parts of his body—for long periods of time, to keep himself from thinking of her, dwelling on her as he wanted to, but all it took to bring that bone deep ache front and center in him was her standing there, looking as young and virginal—like some kind of elfin sprite—before him as she always had, despite that he knew for a fact that she was no longer an innocent.

She was the stuff of his dreams—and his nightmares—incarnate.
"I like it."

Shouldering himself away from the door, which he'd ended up practically sagging against when all of those unwanted feelings had stormed through him with the force of a hurricane, he replied sarcastically, "And here I was, spending all of my time worrying about what your opinion would be."

Refusing to take the bait, Cate responded levelly, "Well, then you can rest easy now, can't you?"

She reached for her luggage but Rome got there first, and she knew it would be a waste of her energy to try to wrestle them away from him. And what's more, she knew that he'd enjoy that entirely too much, so she backed off without a word. "Two suitcases? Dare we hope you're wearing something other than jeans and t-shirts nowadays? Or is one of them full of make-up and a foldable trowel?"



CATE WASN'T ABOUT to let him needle her—something he had long since become a master at—and she did her best not to let him see—and not to fully acknowledge to herself—just how much his comments hurt.

Instead, she smiled sweetly, looking all that long way up at him and saying, "Well, at least I know you better than to ever hope that you'll have become any less of a misogynist asshole."

With that, she headed out of the kitchen to the sound of his deep chuckles and down the long hallway, past what she knew had become his room but had been his parents' while she'd been there, not stopping until she got to the room she had usually used, which, in some corners of her mind that she couldn't quite quash, she still thought of as "her" bedroom.

The door was closed, and Cate experienced a few seconds of concern that he might have turned it into a laundry room or a second study or a junk room.

When the door swung open at her gentle push, she was unprepared for the reality of what she saw.

Instead, it was pristine—kept exactly the way she'd left it when she'd walked out of this place years ago. There was her pink canopied bed, her pretty, matching Italian Provincial style desk with bookshelf hutch—that she remembered Rome had built for her in self-defense, since her books were threatening to take over the bookcases in the living room and even his study. Even the entirely embarrassing heartthrob posters still decorated the walls, with the ultra-feminine tiny pink rose wall paper peeking out from behind them here and there.

"Dear God," she breathed as the big man followed her in—looking ridiculous, as he always had in her room, such blatant masculinity sticking out like a sore thumb when surrounded by unapologetically feminine trappings.

"That's what I said when you decorated it originally."

"It was not! You were nowhere near that reserved—you teased me mercilessly!" she huffed, diving into the first suitcase when what

she desperately wanted to do was to drink in the sight of him, to begin mooning over him again as she had before, thinking the entire time that she was fooling everyone about it—including him, when she should have realized that nothing got by Rome Cavanaugh.

"I thought that was an older brother's duty—to tease his little sisters?"

But they both knew the truth of the fact that neither one of them had thought about each other that way—especially at the fevered, frantic end of her time here—and the pall of shared, illicit memories descended on the room, unsettling the two of them even further, neither of them able—or willing—to say anything to each other to ease it.

Cate looked up just in time to see the door to his bedroom open, inadvertently locking eyes with a beautiful sylph of a woman who immediately draped herself all over Rome from behind.

Insecure much? Cate thought cattily.

"And who is this?" the woman asked, even that innocuous question oozing sex.

Used to being given the once over and then being dismissed by stunningly beautiful women, and knowing that introductions, if they were to be made, were his responsibility, Cate returned to her unpacking, hoping no one noticed how close to a faint she was, how her hands were shaking, face flushed an uncomfortably bright, hot red.

Then she almost snorted at herself as she forced herself to concentrate on emptying the first case. Of course, no one was going to notice anything about her. She was quite sure that she could self-immolate right in front of the two of them and they wouldn't turn a hair.

Not quite shrugging the other woman off, Rome nonetheless walked away from her, further into Cate's room. "Billie Pollock, this is Cate Hennessey—"

"Your parents' ward?" the woman interrupted sharply, standing straighter, her eyes narrowing on Cate.

"She was," he agreed, unable to tear his eyes away from the small figure who had barely looked up long enough to acknowledge the introduction, returning immediately to continue furiously unpacking, that slender jaw set uncomfortably tight for reasons he preferred not to explore.

"But I thought she was *persona non grata* around here."

And he watched as it only got tighter at Billie's unkind, unthinking words. He knew he hadn't imagined how Cate's shoulders sagged for a second, then straightened again as she studiously distributed neatly folded piles of clothing into the empty drawers of her childhood bureau.

Cate had never heard anyone say out loud exactly how Rome felt about her—not that she was wrong—but the words hurt more than she could ever imagine they would. But she hoped she'd managed to conceal her pain from him as Rome addressed the other woman and growled, "Don't you have to begin the three hour process of getting ready before your appointment this afternoon?"

That made it almost nice to hear that she wasn't the only one on the receiving end of his sharp tongue, but not quite. It didn't pass her notice that he had "teased" her about needing a suitcase full of makeup only to make that cutting remark to his current lover, who apparently spent a considerable amount of time putting her face on—not that she looked as if she needed to in any way.

She refused to think of his comment as having come to her defense in any way, since she knew he was no longer inclined to do so.

Finally remembering what little was left of her manners, Cate turned to offer the younger woman her hand, saying, "It's nice to meet you, Miss Pollack." But she wasn't quite quick enough.

Billie was already standing in the doorway to Rome's room and didn't even bother to turn around as she mumbled something to the effect of, "You, too."

Feeling foolish with her hand stuck out there, Cate bit back a nasty comment of her own in favor of engaging with either of them as little as was possible.

They were *not* why she was here.

When everything had been packed away, she was unnerved to realize that he was still standing there, and that he had been watching her—in that devastatingly intent manner of his—the entire time.

"Well. Since I'm done here, I'm going to go check on her," she said, rededicating herself to achieving the impossible—ignoring him—and grabbing the handle to the second duffle bag style case as she turned to leave the room.

"I'd be glad to take that for you," Rome found himself saying automatically, already reaching out to take it from her, his rebellious mind conjuring any excuse to remain in her company.

But Cate—without so much as glancing in his direction—held it out of his easy reach, saying much too primly for his tastes, "No, thank you. I managed to get it here from Vermont without your assistance. I think I can manage to get it ten feet down the hall."

When she moved determinedly forward, the mountain yielded to her for the second time in less than half an hour, making her feel somewhat victorious, although Cate knew she shouldn't get used to it.

Even knowing his eyes were still on her, she paused for a moment at the next door down the hall, hanging her head and taking a deep, fortifying breath as she reached for and donned the bright yellow paper outfit—gown, mask and booties—and used the hand sanitizer that was there.

Knowing how jarring the realization could be that they had to observe neutropenic precautions because of Faith's depleted immune system, when Rome spoke, both his words and his tone were as gentle as she'd ever heard them as he came to stand much too close to her, putting one big paw over her hand as it death

gripped the doorknob. "We have a nurse, you know. She's getting the best of care. You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

Swallowing back tears, Cate whispered tightly, "Of course, I want to. She's the closest thing I have left to family. She's the sister of my heart, if not my blood. I know she would drop everything and come running to me without a thought if our situations were reversed." Cate gave him a brave, if watery smile. "How could I do any less for her?"

With that, she pushed the door wide open, yelling, "Surprise, sicko! Your worst nightmare is here to help you convalesce—or is that coalesce? I always get those two mixed up—"

Although he knew he should withdraw, that there was no place for him there, really—even though he was Faith's blood relative—he couldn't quite make himself do so, at least at first, and he was glad he hadn't, because the smile that lit his little sister's face was the first he'd seen in quite some time.

Faith's shriek of happiness was much softer than it should have been, the arms she raised for the hug that was wholeheartedly given didn't—couldn't—stay in the air very long, but there was no denying just how ecstatic Cate's unexpected appearance made her. Rome knew that, as much as he didn't want to, as much as he knew it was going to kill him to have to look at her, knowing what he'd done to her all those years ago, he was going to *have* to let her stay.

She just might be the difference between Faith making it through this, or not.

And if it made his sister this happy, he'd invite the Devil himself to come stay.

"How'd you get here? What about your work? How long can you stay?"

Trying to ignore how shocked she was at her friend's frail appearance, Cate joked, "I flew—and boy, are my arms tired!"

Faith frowned up at her friend. "That was beneath you."

"Laughter's the best medicine, though," Cate pointed out.

"I'm not laughing."

"Well, you never did have much of a sense of humor. Move over. You're hogging the bed, as always. Someone would think you're sick or something. Sheesh!"

"You haven't answered my questions!"

Cate took a seat on the edge of the bed, facing Faith, her back to Rome, and hauled the big bag up onto the bed, pausing for a moment. "Bossy much?" But she went on to do exactly that. "Let's see, I flew and rented a car—and you are *so* not worth how much an impromptu ticket cost, believe me. Not at all. Work is with me—I told them I had to leave and they made accommodations." She breathed on her shortly cropped fingernails then polished them on her non-existent lapel.

"I'm impressed," Faith allowed, without sarcasm.

"As well you should be," Cate grinned. "They're terribly afraid they're going to lose me to the competition. As to how long I can stay..." She trailed off, turning to look at Rome pointedly, then back at Faith. "I wasn't at all sure he was going to let me in, but nothing was going to keep me away from you. If all else fails, I have a taser in my purse," she stage-whispered.

"You don't!"

Still imposing, Rome could hardly let that one go. "Only if you bought it since you landed. I highly doubt it's on the TSA's list of things you can take on a plane, since you can't even bring shampoo."

"Thank you for letting her in—she's just the person I need to see right now," Faith said quietly to her brother. "And I hope you two can settle things between you, once and for all. I'm sick of having to go up to New England when I want to see her. I want to be able to have her at my house—at *our* house. At one time, it was a very happy home to all three of us, and I want to see a return to that."

Cate shook her head slowly, murmuring almost too quietly to be heard, "No. No, it was never mine."

There was that unease again, stiflingly heavy and hard to find one's way out of.

Faith looked appalled and opened her mouth to argue with Cate, but then she caught sight of both her brother's and her friend's faces and thought better of it, for the moment, anyway. This was not the time or the place. It was too happy an event just to have Cate here. "What's in that enormous bag of yours? You wrestled that in and out of the airport on your own? Have you been lifting weights?"

"No—"

"Don't tell me you got your boyfriend to do it?" Faith teased, and Rome tried not to let anyone see how his ears perked, hoping—when he knew he shouldn't—for a firm denial from Cate.

"No, I hefted *two* big bags in and out of the airport by myself—one with clothes that are in my—shudder—room, and this one, which is full of things to perk you up and help me distract you."

Knowing he should duck out, Rome even managed to get himself to take half a step towards the door, but he wanted to stay and see what she'd brought, to see his sister's face light up again.

"First, I know you don't have to watch your figure at the moment, so I got you this—" It was an enormous package of Cadbury Éclairs that was practically bigger than either of them, which were only available in the UK or on the Internet.

Faith snorted. "It's almost as big as the vat of them you gave me when we found them while we were over there. My favorite candy of all time! Thank you!"

"Yeah, well, I suggest that you put those somewhere I will never find them, or you know they'll be gone in about fifteen minutes—"

"I know—that's how the first vat disappeared," Faith teased.

The next things she pulled out of her magic bag were games to occupy Faith's time—nothing strenuous, which she couldn't have handled anyway—but board games, some of which they'd played when they were kids—like Sorry and Clue—and some of which would be new to them—like Skipbo and Uno.

There was even a Ouija board and a Magic Eight Ball.

The last thing she pulled out was a very old, very bedraggled stuffed rabbit.

"Sampson!" Faith made a surprisingly energetic lunge for it but then decided against it before she took possession of it, reeling back away from it. "But he's yours—I think he's the only thing you've never shared with me."

The three of them knew that Sampson was just about the only thing of hers that had survived the fire that had caused her to end up living with them in the first place.

"Yeah, but he's very good company, and he's very good listener, and he's surprisingly good at healing people," Cate explained, her voice becoming less steady and tearier the longer she spoke, until she finally just pressed the stuffie into Faith's hands, the two women falling naturally into a tight hug.

Rome finally took that as his cue to leave, ignoring the tears that threatened to spill out of his own eyes as he closed the door behind him to the sounds of their burbling giggles.