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# BACK TO THE RANCH

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

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## Chapter 1

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“**Y**ou look exhausted,” Claire Middleton said as she and her best friend, Sherri Evans, made their way toward the hospital employee parking lot. “I can’t blame you, though; these double shifts are draining.”

“I am exhausted,” Sherri confirmed, “and these double shifts are not only draining, they’re getting old.”

“You’ve worked more of them than me lately, so I’m sure you feel that way right now.”

“It’s not just right now, Clair. I’m really getting tired of this whole thing.”

Claire heard something in her friend’s voice that caught her attention, and she stopped to look at her. “What do you mean, this whole thing?”

“Like I told you before, I’m not as happy as I used to be. I think I need a change in my life.”

“So stop turning down the guys that keep asking you out. A man in your life would definitely be a change in your life.”

“I haven’t turned down all that many,” Sheri quickly pointed out. “Just the ones I didn’t think would ever lead to anything.”

“Don’t put so much into it. Maybe what you need is a fun night out with a good-looking guy to get your mind off the hospital. You can go out and have a good time for an evening without having to marry the guy, you know.”

“Maybe you can, but you know me. If I go out with a man I’m not at all attracted to I’d feel like I’m using him. It wouldn’t be right to let him spend money on me when I’m really not interested in him.”

“Maybe you’re just being too particular. For instance, what was wrong with that new resident that asked you out a few days ago? Every unattached nurse in this hospital has been drooling over him, trying to get a chance to work with him, hoping he’ll ask her out. Everyone was shocked when he finally did ask someone out, and you turned him down. What was wrong with him?”

“Nothing was wrong with him. He seems nice, although he seems to really enjoy having the women drool over him. I just don’t want to get involved with anyone right now.”

“Why not? You said you’re not happy anymore; maybe he could bring a smile back to your face.”

Sherri didn’t miss the goofy grin on Claire’s face and had to laugh. “Maybe, but lately I’ve been thinking I need a bigger change than that.”

Claire knew Sherri well, and those words concerned her. “A bigger change? Have you looked at him lately? He’s a hunk.” Glancing over and not seeing even the hint of a smile, she paused. “What kind of change are you thinking about, Sherri? You’re a terrific nurse, but I know the double shifts are not fun. Are you thinking about looking for a different job, at a doctor’s office maybe?”

“I am, but I’m thinking about an even bigger change. I’m not sure I want to be a nurse anymore, or that I want to live in Boston.”

They were about to their cars, but Claire stopped and turned to look at Sherri. “But I graduated with you and saw the excitement in your eyes when you became a nurse. You loved it. What happened?”

“I did, but people have changed. It still feels good when you can help people and they appreciate it, but I’ve had too many bad experiences lately, like the elderly lady her family brought to the emergency room last night. They said she’d been sick for three weeks and seemed to be having a hard time getting her breath, but they waited until she passed out to bring her to the hospital. When she didn’t pull through, they blamed us. They said they thought we were supposed to be a good hospital, but obviously not since we killed their beloved mother.”

“You can’t let that get to you, Sherri. You know it wasn’t your fault. They should have brought her in when she first got sick, or at least when she was struggling to breathe. They didn’t want to admit that, though, so they blamed you and the others in the ER because you were there when they were hurting.”

“I know, but that sort of thing seems to happen more often than it used to. Last week a lady came in that had been hurt in an accident. Her leg was bleeding badly, and she was really pale. I cut her jeans off and was able to get the bleeding stopped while we waited for the doctor to get to her. After the surgery she asked if she could talk to me, so I went into her room, thinking maybe she wanted to thank me. Oh, no. She told me I owe her a new pair of jeans and was upset that I ruined her favorite pair.”

“What an ungrateful little—”

“I know,” Sherri said, cutting her off, “but I’ve been seeing that more and more. It’s not just here at the hospital, either. People are getting snarky, and I’m not saying it’s just in Boston. When I went on vacation last summer, I noticed it in all four of the bigger cities I visited. The thing is, I don’t think most people even notice it, especially if they were born and raised in the city. I

was born and raised in the country, and I'm starting to think that saying may be true—you can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl."

Claire paused a few moments, considering what her friend had said. "But aren't there things you do like about the city?"

"Sure, there are. In the country you don't have anywhere near the choice of restaurants, and you have to drive to the city if you want to see a concert or play. On the other hand, though, you can see the stars at night, and people treat you more like a neighbor. I miss that."

"I know you're tired and want to go home, but let's go grab a sandwich. You have to eat something tonight, anyway, since I know you didn't get much of a break to eat, so let's do it together. I can tell you've given this a lot of thought, and I want to hear what you're thinking."

Sherri agreed, and the two of them went to a nearby diner. They talked while they ate, and by the time they left to go home, Sherri had reached a decision she'd been struggling with for months. She slept better than she had in quite some time, and felt great the next day when she turned in her resignation at work and started making plans.

Four weeks later she felt great as she thanked her coworkers for the wonderful party they had for her, filled with lots of well wishes. She promised to keep in touch with Claire, and went back to her tiny apartment for a final night.

The next morning she woke early, anxious to start her two-day drive back home to the ranch she'd grown up on in Texas. It was indeed a long journey, but when she finally pulled into the familiar drive, she was elated to see her father walking out of the house to meet her. When he gave her a bear hug like only he had done before, she truly felt like she was home, and it felt wonderful.

"It's so good to see you," he said as he rocked back and forth a bit with her tucked securely in his arms. "I've missed you."

“I’ve missed you, too, Dad,” she said, tears welling in her eyes.

Seeing the tears, he pulled back to take a better look at her. “Hey, hey, what’s going on? Something’s wrong?”

“Not really,” she tried to say convincingly, while fighting back her tears. “I think I’m just homesick.”

His eyes were squinted, as he looked her over again head to toe. “Are you sure there’s nothing more to it?”

“To be honest, I guess I can’t really say for sure. But I do know I wasn’t happy there anymore, and every time I had a few minutes and my mind wandered I found myself thinking back to this ranch, and you, and the horses, and even the hands here on the ranch and the people in town. They’re all so friendly. It’s not like that in the city.”

“Are the people there rude?”

“No, they’re not rude; they’re just not friendly. When I first got there, I said hello to a lot of people, and most of them looked at me with a strange expression. Claire told me I made some of them a bit uncomfortable. Apparently in the city you don’t talk to people you don’t know. After thinking about it, I guess it makes sense. Kids are taught about stranger danger, so they grow up only talking to people they know. I have to admit I understand that, especially since there are so many more people in the city and you obviously don’t know anything about most of them. But I kept thinking if I don’t talk to people how am I going to get to know them?”

“How about other people there; do they talk to others?”

“They talk to the people they know. If they grew up there they know more people, either from living in the same apartment building, or going to school with them, or maybe working with them. People seem to change jobs a lot, and you get to know some people every place you work.”

Her dad, Frank Evans, nodded his head. He was a rancher, always had been at heart, but to appease his father, Richard,

after high school he'd gone to college, gotten a business degree, and worked in Fort Worth for two years. At the end of the two years Richard could see how unhappy he was, and suggested he go help his grandfather, Ben, on the ranch.

Ben had known Frank always loved staying with them on the ranch, and had wanted to teach him ranching after he finished school if he wanted to learn. If he still enjoyed it, like he felt he would, he planned to someday give the ranch to him. However, Richard hadn't liked ranching and was happy when he himself graduated from college and got a job in town, and he wanted Frank to have the same opportunity. As a grandfather, Ben agreed to let his grandson have that opportunity, but had been watching Frank and could tell he wasn't happy living and working in Fort Worth. He'd been talking to Richard about letting him try ranching for a year or two and see where he was happier. Richard finally agreed after Frank had given it two years, and Ben made the offer to Frank.

It was easy to see where Frank's heart was, and once he'd worked his way up to foreman and had mastered that, Ben began teaching him the art of ownership. There was a lot more to learn about that facet of the ranch, but Frank picked it up quickly. His degree in business he was sure was helpful. As it turned out, he not only picked it up easily, but had a few suggestions he discussed with his grandfather. They worked together for a few years, until Ben proudly signed the ranch over to Frank and retired.

Frank had insisted his grandparents live in the house they'd always lived in, and he moved his wife into the smaller house behind it. When his grandmother passed away Frank and his wife moved into the larger home to help care for Ben, who was ninety-five by then. Frank had never seen any two people more in love than Ben and his wife, so it didn't surprise him much when Ben died just three months later.

Frank and his wife were only able to have one child, and



although they tried not to spoil Sherri, Frank readily admitted they might not have told her no quite as often as they probably should have. Overall, though, growing up on the ranch helped to ground her. She had chores she did, although working with the horses was more a pleasurable pastime for her than a chore. She loved the horses and had a special way with them.

Now, as she was talking to Frank, comparing life in the city with life on the ranch, he nodded, knowing and understanding what she meant. He'd felt the same way when he was living in Fort Worth. It was not the same as living on a ranch and going to a smaller town for supplies. The people he dealt with in town all the time knew him and greeted him. Sherri had always been a people person, so he had no trouble understanding what she was saying. "I'm glad you're home, where you belong," he said, meaning every word of it.

"Me, too. I don't have any idea what I'm going to do next, but I worked a lot of double shifts up there and I made good money. I didn't have enough time off to enjoy it, so I have a little money saved. For right now I'm just going to take a little time to enjoy being back home on the ranch. Then I'll decide what I'm going to do with my life."

"That sounds like a wise choice," Frank said. "Give yourself some time to clear your thoughts and get back to a good place before you start trying to make any life choices. If you decide you miss nursing, there are always openings for them around here, but don't push yourself in that direction. Something else may jump out at you. Follow your heart and do what makes you happy."

"Thanks, Dad. I knew I could count on you to understand."

"I do understand," he said with a chuckle. "In fact, my days in Fort Worth are coming back to me. Take some time to relax and then see how you feel. In the meantime, I could sure use your help with the horses."

"Why? I love working with the horses and I'm glad you won't

be upset if I spend time with them, but what do you mean you could use my help with them?"

"I'm sure I told you Jed retired. He was fantastic with the horses."

"Yeah, I knew he retired, but I thought you hired someone to take his place."

"I did, but he didn't last very long. It turns out he didn't have as much experience working with horses as he said he did. In fact, he wasn't very good with them. Bill, the man that helped Jed when he needed help, was able to go in and get the horses calmed back down one day after the new man had been working with them. I switched him and Bill, and let Bill work with the horses and put the new man with the cattle. He didn't like working with the cattle and left. Bill agreed to work with the horses until we can find someone else, but he prefers working with the cattle. I'm sure he'll be happy to hear you're back and willing to help him some."

"I'll be happy to help Bill," Sherri said enthusiastically. "I love spending time with them."

"Maybe you can help me interview possible replacements, as well," Frank suggested.

"I'd be happy to do that, too."

Frank and Sherri spent the next hour on the front porch catching up, until Nancy, Frank's cook and housekeeper, stuck her head out the door to tell them supper was ready, and they needed to get cleaned up. Sherri had to laugh after she went back inside. Frank had hired Nancy after Sherri left for college, and although she'd met Nancy several times when she was home visiting, it always drew a chuckle to see the no-nonsense way she treated her father. It certainly wasn't something she'd seen much.

Knowing what his daughter was chuckling about, he smiled. "You heard her. We best get inside and get washed up. You don't want to make her have to call you twice." After they shared a little laugh, he added, "Ty will be in any minute now."

“Ty?”

“Ty Baker, my foreman. He takes his meals with me so we can discuss ranch business. Is that going to be a problem for you, now that you’re here?”

“Not unless he’s a real jerk,” Sherri said with a grin. “Seriously, Dad, no, it’s not a problem. I love the ranch, too, and if I’m going to be living here and helping with the horses, I’d love to hear you guys talking about the ranch and what needs done.”

“Good. I’d like you to be kept up on what’s happening, as well.” He gave her a similar grin as the one she’d given him. “And Ty’s not a real jerk. Well, at least not that I’ve seen yet. He’s been my foreman a little over a year now and he’s a good guy. He’s a good foreman and isn’t afraid to get out there and get his hands dirty right along with the rest of the guys. He has their respect, which usually tells me a lot.”

Sherri nodded in agreement. Ten minutes later she and Frank walked into the dining room and a Greek god who was seated at the table stood. He was a fairly tall man, at six feet or so, had gorgeous, thick, black hair, dark expressive eyes that Sherri thought were looking into her very soul, and a smile that would draw anyone’s attention. She was so drawn to him she almost missed what he said, until she realized he was walking toward her with his hand outstretched. “You must be Sherri. I’ve heard a lot about you, and I’ve been eager to meet you.”

“And you must be Ty. Nice to meet you,” she answered, once she found her voice. She was impressed when he held her chair out for her in an effortless way she could tell was routine for him. “Thank you.”

He nodded and returned to his chair, directly across the table from her, but waited until Frank was at the table, as well, before sitting. Nancy served a meal that Sherri was sure any other day would have looked delicious, but Sherri had a hard time concentrating. Ty had affected her like no other man ever had, but she wasn’t sure why. Sure, he was good looking – very good looking –

but that wasn't the main thing she looked for in a man. She liked a man that had manners, which Ty apparently did, but again, that wasn't something that normally had her mesmerized. His winning smile should probably be outlawed, but again, it shouldn't have had that big of an effect on her, either. In fact, no one ever had, so why did she seem so nervous around him?

She was glad when once they all filled their plates, her dad spoke up. "I'm sure you two want to get to know each other a bit, and that's fine, but let's get our business out of the way first. Then I'll tell you a thing or two about each other that you may be interested in, as well as a little surprised." Both younger people were surprised at his announcement, but looked at each other, smiled, and nodded.

She listened as they talked about what they'd gotten done that day and what needed to be finished the next, and what their plans would be for the next few days. She found it not only interesting, but relaxing. It gave her a chance to gather herself so she wouldn't look and sound like a bumbling idiot when she spoke with Ty. She still hadn't figured out why he made her so nervous, but she was able to push it to the back of her mind to consider later.

She was much more relaxed by the time they were finishing their talk, which happened to be about Bill and the horses. "Bill's doing a good job getting most of the yearlings about ready to break," Ty said. "He's having trouble with three of them, but I'd say the rest will be ready to start putting a saddle on them in another week or two."

"That sounds good," Frank said. "We better plan to work on breaking in three to four weeks then."

Ty nodded in agreement. "We're going to have to move the heifers from the east pasture pretty soon. In another day or two I should be able to have a couple of the men ride the fences in the lower south pasture and make sure it's ready. We'll get them moved before we start breaking the horses."

“Good idea,” Frank said. “The rest of them should all be okay where they are until after we’re done with the breaking, shouldn’t they?”

“Yeah, the rest are okay. They all have good pasture yet. Those heifers are in a small pasture and it’s getting eaten down pretty good.”

“Okay, that sounds good then,” Frank said. “You can tell the men tomorrow we’ll be breaking horses in three or four weeks. Most of them look forward to it. They’ll start talking about it and hopefully the two new guys will pick up on that excitement.”

“I hope so,” Ty agreed. “When you get the men excited about it and they start throwing out challenges to each other you get more done in less time.”

“Competition never hurts a thing,” Frank agreed with a chuckle.

“Can I try my hand at it?” Sherri asked.

“No,” came a solid answer from the two men, both giving her an authoritative look.

“Geesh,” she said, looking from one stern expression to the other. “It’s not like I haven’t done it before.”

Ty’s eyebrows shot up and his stern look turned immediately to Frank, who was shaking his head. “That was years ago, Sherri, and you’d been working with the horses since they were born. They knew you.”

“You said we won’t be trying to break them for three or four weeks yet. That’ll give me time to get them used to me.”

“Used to you, yes,” Frank agreed, “but not well enough to try breaking them.”

“Okay, we’ll table it for now. I’ll work with them for a few weeks and we’ll see how I’m getting along with them then, and we’ll make a decision at that time.”

Ty opened his mouth to say no, but Frank reached over and patted her arm. To his shock, Frank said, “We’ll talk about it again then.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she said with a big smile, but the scowl on Ty’s face had her concerned.