

# It's My Ranch?

By

Misty Malone

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# Chapter One

## Texas, 1855

Jake Hamilton sat in Sam Bennett's office, the town's attorney, staring straight ahead, his mouth open. The attorney was still talking, but Jake heard none of it. He was still trying to digest the part where he was to inherit his neighbor's ranch.

Cord McDonald had been his neighbor, owning and operating the ranch to the north of his, ever since Jake had inherited his place from his grandfather. That had been enough of a surprise and a big enough undertaking for Jake, and he just now, two years later, was finally starting to feel at home running it. But now he was to inherit Cord's ranch, too? His ranch was smaller than Jake's, but still a good-sized ranch. It would be quite a daunting task. But it was what went with the ranch that had Jake sitting there, mouth open, not hearing a word of what Mr. Bennett was saying as he finished reading the will.

Sitting beside him, Cord's only child, nineteen-year-old Loretta—Letti, as everyone in the area knew her—was in just as much shock as Jake. She turned slowly toward Jake, who was already looking at her, the same glazed over expression on both their faces. The two of them remained like that, in a trance-like state, until Mr. Bennett was finished.

"All right, that concludes the reading of the will," Mr. Bennett said. He looked up and saw the stunned expressions on the young people sitting in front of him. He wasn't at all surprised; he expected such a reaction. Truth be told, he felt sorry for them. His business voice was gone and a genuinely caring voice appeared. "Letti, Jake, I know this is a shock to both of you. Cord was my friend, and we talked about this will for quite some time before I wrote it up for him. Maybe if I explain his motives, it will help you understand."

Letti looked at the attorney, her eyes seeking help and understanding. "Was this will his idea?"

"Absolutely," Mr. Bennett replied. "It was entirely his idea. I can't say I encouraged it at all. In fact, at first I was just as stunned as both of you are. But, as he explained his reasons, it made much more sense and by the time I wrote it down, I have to say I believed he thought it all

through and it was a good idea. I still do, though I admit it will take quite a bit of adjustment on both your parts."

"That it will," Jake said. "Would you mind explaining it then?"

"Certainly."

"I don't see any way to, to... to adjust," Letti said, practically spitting the word out of her mouth. "How do I go about getting this changed?"

Mr. Bennett looked at her sadly. "Letti, I'm afraid you can't. Your father was of sound mind when he signed this, and after hearing his reasons, it makes perfect sense. I have to admit, I can't think of a better solution."

"Well, I can," she readily offered. "Give me the damn ranch and let me run it."

"Watch your mouth, Letti," Jake said instinctively. Seeing the look of hostility on her face, he added, "Your father wouldn't want to hear you talking like that. Let's listen to Mr. Bennett's explanation, why your father did this, and then we'll have to decide what we want to do."

Jake could tell Letti wasn't happy with that suggestion, but lacking any others, she sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. "All right, I'll listen, but then we have to find a way to fix it."

Mr. Bennett took a deep breath. "Letti, your father loved you with all his heart. He always has. When your mother died in childbirth, he was devastated. Your mother had no siblings, and her parents had been killed in an Indian raid. Your father's two sisters were your only other family, and they were both insistent that one of them should raise you with their family. Your father refused. They insisted a man didn't know how, or have time, to raise a baby. But he wouldn't hear of it. He insisted you were his little girl and he intended to raise you."

Jake noticed the smile on Letti's face. Cord had truly loved his daughter. That was plain as day for anyone to see.

"So your daddy hired a cook and housekeeper, and she helped raise you," Mr. Bennett continued.

"Lenore is like a mother to me," Letti said. "But you're not telling me anything I don't already know."

"Hear me out. Your father did most of the caring for you in the evening, and Lenore handled the day shift, while he was busy on the ranch. Then once you were big enough, you followed your daddy around like a little puppy dog."

"I loved going out with him. I learned how to run a ranch by following him. I know I can run it," she said, her eyes getting teary.

Jake felt sorry for her and reached over to pat her hand. "I think you could, too," he said.

She looked up at him, surprised. "You do?"

"I do," he answered. "Let's hear what your dad's thinking was, then we'll talk."

She nodded and looked over to Mr. Bennett, who continued his story. "Your daddy loved having you with him, Letti. And you remember that when Lenore married Joe Badger, your daddy made him the foreman. Lenore was still your father's cook and housekeeper, but she lived with her husband at the foreman's cabin, so it was just you and your daddy in the house."

Letti nodded. "I was happy for Lenore, but it was lonely without her there at first in the evenings. She'd been teaching me things like how to sew and cook, mostly in the evenings."

"She'd been teaching you those things at your father's request," Mr. Bennett said.

"It was? He asked her to teach me?"

"He did," Mr. Bennett confirmed. "As much as your father loved you, he wanted you to someday find a man to love. He knew you'd have a hard time doing that if all you knew was how to run a ranch, and you smelled like a cowboy."

"But that's what I liked," she mumbled as she looked down at her lap.

"Your father knew that, Letti," Mr. Bennett tried to explain, "and that's why he let you go out with him so much. But he was also very concerned about the future. He wanted you to have something to offer a man, when one came along who showed interest in you."

Letti blushed. "I don't need a man. I can run that ranch."

"Letti, your daddy knew it, too. You could run it, if all it took was knowhow. But unfortunately, that's not the way it is. A woman just can't do that. For one thing, a woman can't own land."

Letti puffed her chest up, and Jake thought she looked about ready to explode. Before she could say anything, though, Mr. Bennett said, "Now, Letti, I didn't say I agree with that law, so don't go getting all huffy with me, but it's the law, like it or not. And your daddy knew that. He knew he couldn't leave the ranch to you."

"But Jake? Why did he leave it to Jake!"

"Calm down and let me explain it, Letti. I read the conditions he put on it, but you were so busy getting all mad and upset that I'm not even sure you heard them. Let me go over them again and try to explain." He looked over at Jake. "I'm actually not sure either one of you fully grasped everything I said."

"Please continue, Mr. Bennett," Jake said.

"Letti, your daddy loved you more than life itself, but he admitted to me that he let that love for you get the best of him at times."

"What does that mean?" Letti jumped up out of her seat and walked the two steps to the front of Mr. Bennett's desk, leaning over it to get closer to him. "Would you stop beating around the bush here and just say what you mean? Why in the hell did he leave my ranch to Jake?"

"Letti, watch your mouth, and sit down." Jake stood and gently pulled her back to her chair, encouraging her to sit. "If you'll give Mr. Bennett a chance, he's trying to explain it."

She whirled and turned to face Jake. "The hell he is! I want to know what's going on. Why did Daddy give you my ranch?"

Jake was running out of patience with his feisty little neighbor. "Letti, settle down. You know your daddy wouldn't want to hear you talk like that, and he didn't approve of your temper tantrums, either. I'm not warning you again. I think you know exactly what I'll do if you have one more outburst like that."

Her eyes widened and she looked at him sharply. "You wouldn't dare."

"I would dare, and you know it, little girl, so don't push me. Now sit down and let the man explain."

To Mr. Bennett's utmost surprise, Letti, who had the reputation around town of being a little hellion, stared at Jake several moments, but then turned and quietly sat.

Trying to hide his shock, he went on. "Cord was a smart man, but also very honest. He recognized that he'd spoiled you growing up, and he felt bad about that. He said at the time he couldn't bring himself to correct you, but now that you've grown up, he could see what a mistake that was."

She was on her feet instantly. "Daddy didn't say that! How dare you!" Letti was livid.

She started toward Mr. Bennett, but was lifted quickly off her feet by Jake, who turned her around to face him. "He did, too, Letti. He told me that, as well."

She harrumphed, clearly not believing him. "He did not. When?"

"The day I caught you riding on my land, when you jumped that fence and chased the mountain lion up the hill."

She quieted as her face flamed. "You talked to Daddy that day?"

"Of course I did," Jake answered. "I had a lot of respect for your father as a rancher and a neighbor. I went to him and told him what I'd done. I didn't want any hard feelings between him and me, so I went to him and was honest. I admitted everything. I told him that you'd been on my land, and although I don't mind that at all, I couldn't stand by and watch you jump fences with that big gelding of yours, while you're chasing a mountain lion, when you were alone out there, without a gun. I told him once I was sure the cat was gone I pulled you off your horse and spanked your bottom good."

Letti's face turned a darker shade of red, and she looked down at the floor. "I can't believe you told him that."

"I did. I assumed you would tell him, so I was completely honest with him. I told him you were cussing at me so much I didn't think I was making my point over those blasted pants you were wearing, so I pulled them down and spanked you on your drawers."

Letti's head flew up at that. "You told him that? I can't believe he didn't call the sheriff on you."

"I assured him I left your drawers in place. I told him I was real sorry if he didn't like it, but I just couldn't let that happen on my land without doing something about it. I told him it was too dangerous for a little lady to be out there alone, doing something like that." He gentled his voice a bit as he looked into her eyes and said, "Letti, you could have gotten seriously hurt, or even killed. If that mountain lion had come after your horse, there's a good chance you'd have fallen off. You didn't have a gun, and no one even knew you were out there!"

Mr. Bennett had to smile a bit as he watched the interaction between the two young people. Loretta was a very pretty young lady. She was petite, and looked more like a young schoolgirl than her actual nineteen years. Her curly blond hair had streaks of red, which he felt matched her personality.

Jake, on the other hand, was a big man, over six feet tall, with dark hair. He'd grown up working on his father's ranch, before inheriting The Circle H two years ago, at the age of twenty-four. Hard work was nothing new to him, and it showed in his muscular body. Watching the



two of them now, Mr. Bennett was beginning to think his friend, Cord, knew exactly what he was doing. He hid his smile and turned his attention back to the two of them.

"Well," Jake said, "I told your father all about it so there wouldn't be any misunderstandings. He wasn't upset. In fact, he told me that very day that he knew he'd spoiled you, and he wasn't exactly sure what he should do about it. He shook my hand and thanked me for telling him what happened." Jake looked her in the eye and added, "And he thanked me for spanking you that day, too, Letti. He said that was a lesson you needed to learn, and he hoped you learned it." He was quiet a moment. "Didn't he talk to you about it?"

"No," she admitted. "He never mentioned it. I didn't know that he knew."

"Well, he did," Jake assured her. "And he wasn't upset about it. He knew I'd do it again if the need arose, and he was all right with that. So sit down and listen to Mr. Bennett, before the need arises now."

She glared at him a few moments. When he held her gaze, not backing off a bit, she sat once again.

Mr. Bennett felt more confident about this will, as he observed the two of them. He didn't disappoint them. "Mr. Hamilton—"

"Jake," the young man corrected. "Everybody calls me Jake."

"Thank you. Jake, Cord said you're the only man around who doesn't cower around his daughter." He turned to Letti and added, "And he said Jake is the only man he's seen you show respect to."

"He thought I respect him?"

"Yes, he did, and from what I've seen here, I'd have to say I agree with him. Before you argue, let me go on. Miss McDonald, your daddy loved you, but he worried about you. He worried about what would happen to you after he was gone. He knew he couldn't legally leave the ranch to you. Not only could we not put it in your name, but he knew as a woman you'd have a hard time getting ranch hands to respect you. They don't expect a woman to know much about ranching, and they wouldn't take you seriously."

"The hands we have now would," she argued.

"He wasn't so sure," Mr. Bennett challenged. "Cord said they are very aware that you know your way around a ranch, but they also know your temper gets the best of you at times, and

you do things impulsively. He didn't think the hands would work for you very long after you had a couple good temper tantrums, and took your anger out on them, which he said you do."

"I do not," she argued.

"You do, too," Jake said calmly. When she stood and turned to face him, hands on her hips, he emphatically said, "Sit down, Letti, and I'll give you a couple examples."

She didn't make any motion to move, and just stared at him, almost a dare, until he started to stand. She quickly sat back down.

"Good move," Jake said. "The first one that comes to my mind, and should come to yours, is Clint. Remember him?"

"He was a tattletale," Letti insisted.

"Your father sent Clint to see what that cloud of dust was in the big pasture. When he got back, what was Clint supposed to do, lie to his boss?"

"He could have just said the cattle were upset. He didn't have to tell him why they were upset."

"He did, Letti. Your father asked him what had upset the cattle. He had to tell him you were out there in the pasture yelling and teaching your horse to jump. He was just being honest with the man who paid his wages."

"He was a tattletale."

"He was simply answering your father's question. You had no business filling his hat with cow manure the next day."

"I didn't fill it. Well, I did," she admitted, "but then it was so heavy I knew he'd notice it. So I took most of it back out."

"And then laughed hysterically when he put his hat on his head after lunch."

"He deserved it."

"No, he didn't," Jake countered. "And your father wasn't very happy when Clint quit. He was one of his best hands."

"It wasn't my fault he quit over something that small."

"But it was your fault, and you know it. He told your father he'd seen you do too many things like that when you get upset, and he wasn't going to put up with it any longer. And how about when you put fire ants on the saddle of the hand that refused to muck out the stalls when your father told you to do it?"

"I was mad. I hate mucking out stalls."

"Which is why your father told you to do it! It was his attempt at finally punishing you for something. But the point is, your father was right," Jake said. "Even the hands you have at the ranch now wouldn't have stayed after a couple tantrums. And you would have had a very difficult time getting new hands that would respect you."

Sam Bennett nodded in agreement. "Cord was worried about that. But he was also worried about you living on the ranch alone, Miss McDonald, especially if you had one or two hands that didn't have a lot of respect for you. Being alone on a ranch is not a safe place for a lady by herself."

"I can take care of myself," Letti insisted.

"I know you can handle a gun as good as any of the men working on your ranch, Letti," Jake said, "but a lady alone is asking for trouble. You can't carry a gun all the time, and there are too many drifters, and just plain bad men, who'd want to take advantage of a lady alone. If one of them came up on you when your back was turned, you wouldn't stand a chance, as little as you are. Your father was right to be concerned about that."

Mr. Bennett was nodding his head again. "Now that you know why he didn't feel he could leave it to you, Miss McDonald, let me explain why he did what he did. He wanted to make sure you have a place to live, and are cared for, until you find a man and get married. As you'll have to admit if you think about it, he was trying his best to get you to stop wearing pants all the time and staying around the barns. He wanted you to be the beautiful young lady he'd seen you grow into. He knew if you wore those new dresses he bought, and acted a bit more like a woman, it wouldn't be long before men were there wanting to court you. He worried, though, about you courting the wrong man."

"I don't need a man," she insisted.

Ignoring her comment, Mr. Bennett continued. "He gave the ranch to Jake with the proviso that Jake will watch out for you, including a place to live, until such time as you're married. You will have a monthly allowance from the money he left in trust for you. That trust will be overseen by Jake."

"By me?" Jake looked truly shocked.

"Yes," Mr. Bennett confirmed. "He knew you would make sure she had money for what she needed, but not let her throw it away. He was afraid if people knew she had a lot of money in her possession, she would attract men who were more interested in her money than her."

"That's something worth considering," Jake agreed. "But why me?"

"For the same reason he gave you the ranch and the condition that you would watch out for her until she marries," Mr. Bennett said. "He knew you'd take care of her. To do that, you would have to keep her close, and keep an eye on her, so that you would know what she needed money for, and how much."

"So I'm to run the ranch, but he wants me to take care of Letti." Jake shook his head. "She won't be safe living on her ranch alone, but I can't move over there and still take care of my ranch."

Mr. Bennett felt sorry for Jake. "It's going to take some time to think it through, I'm sure, Jake."

"It will. For starters, I'm going to have to talk to Cord's foreman, and see if he can keep things going as is until I can decide what I'm doing." He turned to Letti, and sighed. "I know you aren't going to be happy with this, but I'd like you to move into one of my extra bedrooms for a little while."

"I most certainly will not," she instantly replied. "I will not move into the home of an unmarried man."

"I have a cook and housekeeper who lives there as well, Letti. I would never compromise your reputation."

"No, I am not leaving. I have a home and I'm not leaving it."

Jake sighed. "Letti, I'm not saying on a permanent basis. But I take your father's wishes seriously, and it just is not safe for you to be living alone. Will you please agree to stay with me while we work this out?"

"There's nothing to work out," she insisted. "I'm staying at home, where I belong."

Jake ran his hand through his hair as he looked at his impossible neighbor. "Letti, no. Until I have a chance to think it through, you're going to stay at my house. After we both give it some thought, we'll talk about it, and decide what we're going to do."

"I don't think so."

"I do," Jake said in a stern voice. "One way or another, you will stay at my house. The question is if you'll be going there with clothes you have picked out, or if you'll be going there with the ones I put in a satchel for you, while you're standing in a corner after I give you a sore bottom. It's your choice, Letti."

"Oh, I don't think so." She turned to Mr. Bennett. "Did you hear that? You aren't seriously going to make me go to his home, are you, after he just threatened me like that?"

Mr. Bennett sighed. "Miss McDonald, Mr. Hamilton is a gentleman. Your father trusted him, and so do I. I agree with both of them. It is not safe for you to be living alone out there on a ranch. You'll be much better off at Mr. Hamilton's."

"But what if he treats me terribly?"

"I have complete confidence he will treat you just fine. In fact, I feel even better about that now, after listening to him. He told you the two of you would talk and decide how to handle this. According to the will, he doesn't have to do that. The will gives him the right to take the ranch and run it, and you, however he sees fit. He's not doing that. Instead, he said he plans on talking to you and coming up with a solution together. I think you're very lucky your father found a man like him to look after you. I would suggest you try to work with him instead of against him. I think things will go much smoother."

"But what if they don't?"

"Let me remind you of the other things in the will. Cord's taken care of that. If Mr. Hamilton refuses to see to it you are safe and have a place to live, the ranch is to be sold and the money added to your trust. However, that trust will then be controlled by myself, Sheriff Adams, and Mr. Lawson, the banker. The three of us will meet regularly and determine how much you will be given for a monthly allowance, and anything else we need to decide. According to the arrangements in the will, you will live at a boarding house until you are married, to a man the three of us agree to."

"What? No. I am not living in a boarding house. What about the money from the ranch? Why can't I use that money to buy a house in town?"

"As we have said several times, you can't live alone, Letti. Your father felt very strongly about that. You will be living in a boarding house, and the money in your trust will be turned over to your husband once you are married."

"Turned over?"

"He sincerely hoped Jake, here, would agree to take the ranch, along with your care. He was sure you'd be much happier, and safer. I tend to agree with him."

Both Jake and Letti looked worn out. Mr. Bennett felt sorry for them. "Why don't you do as Jake's suggested, Miss McDonald, for the time being. Pack some clothes and go stay with him and his housekeeper. She will see that your reputation is secure. I think you both need to take some time and think this situation over, and you need to talk. I'm sure you can work something out. If not, come talk to me next week, and I'll set up what we need to do to sell the ranch."

"But I love the ranch," Letti said, more to herself than anyone else. "I don't want to sell it."

Jake gently pulled her from her chair and lifted her chin so she was looking at him. "I know, Letti. I know how much it means to you, and I don't want it to be sold, either. Let's get some of your clothes and get you settled. We'll do some thinking and some talking, and I'm sure we'll get it worked out."

She looked up at his eyes, and even she could see the concern. She looked over at Mr. Bennett and saw him shaking his head, as well. "All right," she conceded. "But just for a while."

"We'll work something out, Letti," Jake promised.

She nodded her consent, and Jake had a grim, guarded smile on his face. He reached his hand out toward Mr. Bennett. "Thank you, sir, for all the information. We'll get back with you and let you know what we've decided."

"Take some time, son, and good luck to both of you." He shook Jake's hand, and remembered something. "Oh, wait, I have one other thing." He reached into his top drawer and pulled out two envelopes. "Cord wrote these letters in his own hand. There's one to each of you. He said to tell you to read them when you're alone, and to please give it a lot of thought." He handed each of them an envelope with their respective names written on the front.

They took the letters, and Jake nodded to Mr. Bennett as he led Letti out the door and to their horses. They'd ridden in separately, neither knowing the other would be there, nor having any idea why the attorney had asked to meet with them.

As they mounted, Jake suggested, "Let's go to your house first. Once we have you settled in, let's read the letters your father wrote us, and we'll take a little time to think. Then after supper tonight, we'll talk. Does that work for you?"

"I guess that's as good as any."

"Thank you, Letti. I know you'd rather be at home. I don't blame you, but thank you for working with me here."

She nodded, and they rode side by side to her house.