



SPENCER HAVILAND had prided himself on planning his life to the tiniest detail. Until two days ago.

Now he turned off the ignition and stared at the unassuming low-slung house in front of him, its weathered clapboards sagging as though becoming one with nature. In fact, the entire ranch surrounding him looked too exhausted to carry on.

What had he been thinking?

No second guessing. He'd made the only choice that made sense on Saturday night, loading all his personal effects into his sports car and heading northwest... but the Rocking H of his childhood memories and the Rocking H of today bore little resemblance to each other.

The decision was *still* the only thing that made sense. It was just going to be more work than he'd anticipated. Take longer. Well, he had nothing but time.

Spencer winced at the thought as he swung his long legs out of the Maserati into the blistering August heat. The lazy aroma of drying hay wafted on the slight flutter of air tickling the sweat already beading on his face. Bees buzzed amidst the weeds strangling the porch steps.

His memories zinged, too. Memories of visiting the ranch with his grandfather and chasing his second cousin around on horseback. Eric had been older and spent a lot of time on the ranch, always eager to show off to the visitor. In the end, Eric's recklessness had killed him.

A creak pulled his attention to the plank door, now slightly ajar. "Spencer, is that you? Now you're a sight for sore eyes."

Two Border collies bounded across the sparse grass then dropped to a crouch just out of reach and eyed him eagerly. Keeping the dogs in his line of vision, Spencer climbed the three steps and held out his hand. "Uncle Howard?"

The old man shifted a few steps back, looking Spencer over from head to toe.

Spencer returned the favor. His great-uncle's bushy white hair and eyebrows crowned faded blue eyes. Jeans and a plaid shirt that had seen better days draped from his lean body. Spencer's gaze drifted to the old man's feet. The boots looked so battered they might've been the same pair he'd worn during Spencer's childhood.

"Well, it's good to see you, boy. Got some working clothes along, I hope?" The old man clapped him on the shoulder, nearly knocking him flying.

Spencer glanced down at his trouser shorts, perfect for Friday afternoons at the golf club. Those days were behind him. “Yes, I’ve got jeans.” Not Levi’s, but something much trendier and probably less durable. He’d adapt.

“Good, good.” Uncle Howard’s chin indicated Spencer’s Toms slip-ons. “Can’t ride in them shoes, neither.”

He might’ve lived in Texas most of his life, but he hadn’t owned cowboy boots since the last pair his grandfather bought him when he was a kid. On that last trip to Montana, most likely. “I’ll get myself a pair in Missoula once we’ve figured a few things out.” He’d need the boots if the attorney’s letter had accurately portrayed his new life.

Howard nodded. “Fair enough. We’ll make a cowpoke out of you again. C’mon in, boy. Want coffee?”

It wouldn’t be Starbucks. He’d have to drive into Missoula for a decent cup, most likely, and that wouldn’t happen every day. Well, he’d learn to live with it. “Sure, that’d be great. Can I help?”

His uncle waved toward the rustic table by the wide window. “Have a seat. I’ll get it for you.”

The kitchen matched the over-all faded feel of the place. The old man crossed the space to an electric stove flanked by chipped cream-painted cabinets and lifted a monster-sized blue enamel coffee pot.

Taking a deep breath, Spencer took a seat on a wooden chair. A moment later, a giant pottery mug of black coffee plunked down, sloshing over onto the table’s hand-sawn planks.

Grandpa's voice drifted from Spencer's childhood. "Gonna drink coffee, boy? You gotta drink it like a man." He might even have said it right here at this table.

Likely the brothers had the same upbringing. There would be no offer of hazelnut creamer or even sugar. Spencer eyed the mug. How bad could it be? The aroma clogged his nose. Smelled like the real thing, for sure. On steroids. "Thanks, Uncle Howard."

"So, you came." Howard settled in the curved wooden chair at the table's head and wrapped two gnarled, trembling hands around a cup of his own. "Finally."

Spencer nodded and blew a bit of steam off the top of the mug. "Yes, sir."

"Been a long time."

"It has."

"I wasn't sure about you. Your pa turned you into a city boy. I didn't know if cowboying still flowed through your veins."

Was this where he said he wasn't sure, either? When he'd received the registered letter from Uncle Howard's attorney a month ago, he figured he'd bide his time and claim his inheritance when the old man died then sell the ranch to the highest bidder. He didn't need property in Montana, but cashing it in would enable him to upgrade his Dallas lifestyle a notch or two.

His and Madison's. He'd been ready to propose that night. It had seemed the logical next step, and the party had been planned for exactly that event. But Madison hadn't even

caught a glimpse of the little velvet box still wedged in his shorts pocket.

And she never would.

His great-uncle didn't need to know how far removed the Rocking H was from Spencer's first choice. He picked his words carefully. "I've lived in Dallas all my life, that's true. But I've never forgotten this place and how much I loved coming out in the summers with Grandpa." Did he have what it took to run this place? Yes. There weren't any other acceptable options.

Howard eyed him warily. "Fred says my mind is slipping. He tell you that?"

Spencer nodded. The attorney had said that and a whole lot more when Spencer phoned him this morning from somewhere near the Wyoming border.

"I don't see it myself." Howard scratched his neck. "Though sometimes I don't rightly recall how I got someplace or why Carmen is looking at me strange."

"Must be tough." Grandpa had always said Howard was sharper than a tack.

"Anyway, Fred said it's time to set things in order, while I can still do so with a clear mind." Howard slurped his coffee. "With Eric six feet under, I guess you're the only Haviland left."

As usual, Spencer was the last resort. Would Madison even have said yes if he'd popped the question on one knee? Surely she'd understood the purpose of the gathering of their closest friends and both families. He yanked himself back to

the ranch kitchen. "Not the only one. There's Eric's widow and their daughter."

Howard waved his hand. "She's a good girl, Carmen is. She's been trying hard, but it takes a man to run a spread the size of the Rocking H. Most of the hayfields and rangelands are leased out, but it's time to reclaim what belongs to the Haviland name. Why, my grandpa Delbert was one of the first settlers in this area. He staked out the Rocking H round about the time the railway went in, and they were cryin' for beef back east. He built up this side of the valley, and William Delgado took the other."

Delgado. Sounded vaguely familiar.

"Those Delgados think they're something else. They've bought up Standing Rock, and one of their sons married into Paradise Creek Ranch. They're too big for their britches, them Delgados. At least those boys haven't come sniffing around Carmen."

Spencer blinked, trying to catch up. "Why would they?" He wanted nothing to do with a feud over ranch land or grazing rights or whatever the going term was in the twenty-first century.

"She's a pretty girl, Carmen, and a good cook if you like fancy stuff like pizza. But they've missed their chance to get their hands on the Rocking H, now that you're here." Howard smirked at him, slapping the table.

Maybe they'd be interested in buying the ranch when Spencer was ready to sell. He filed the information away then lifted the coffee mug and took a deep slurp, sputtering on the

tarry bitterness. There might not be a Starbucks anywhere near the ranch, but surely people could make decent coffee at home. He'd learn how, starting tomorrow, unless Carmen could do a better job than the old man.

He looked around the kitchen, obviously a woman's domain with the gingham curtains and polka-dotted potholders. "Where is Carmen?"

"Gone down to Saddle Springs for groceries or some such thing. Cain't rightly recall." Uncle Howard grinned. "Ain't she gonna be surprised to see you here?"



"Mommy! Mommy, look! There's a shiny red car at our house."

Carmen Haviland narrowed her gaze at the expensive-looking sports car. "So there is, sweetie. Looks like Uncle Howard has company. Want to help me carry in the groceries?"

Six-year-old Juliana slumped dramatically into her booster in the SUV's backseat. "Do I *have* to?"

"You sure do." Carmen glared at the Texas license plate. All evidence pointed to the arrival of Eric's second cousin. Her work was cut out for her. She had to make Uncle Howard

see that a city boy was unfit to inherit the Rocking H, and that she was a much better choice. If only Howard actually let her make any decisions, he'd soon see how she could turn this place around, but he smiled indulgently, all but patting her on the head like he did Juliana, and that was that.

She handed two of the lighter bags to Juliana and gathered as many more in her own hands as she could, nudging the door shut with her foot. It might be a while before she could get back for the rest, and she didn't want to leave an open invitation to Gwynn or Selah. "Let's go see who's here." She straightened her shoulders and turned to her daughter, only to hear the front door click shut.

No. Who knew what the child would say to Spencer or to Howard?

Carmen jogged up the steps and fumbled with the knob around her bags. She got inside the door in time to hear Juliana's voice.

"My name is Juliana Erica Haviland. Who're you?"

"I'm Spencer, your daddy's cousin."

His voice was deeper than Carmen remembered, but then, she hadn't been paying much attention the last two times they'd met. He'd come for the wedding, and he'd come for Eric's funeral. Both events had been held in the Springs of Living Water Church down in Saddle Springs. Neither time had the man set foot on the Rocking H.

She stepped into the kitchen doorway behind her daughter. "Spencer. What a surprise."

"Carmen, it's good to see you. I hope you're doing well?"

He wore a white golf shirt with a logo on the chest and dressy shorts. And on his feet? Slip-on canvas loafers. Perfect ranch attire, she thought, stifling an eyeroll. And Uncle Howard thought Spencer could do a better job operating the Rocking H than she could?

She'd ignore the fact that he was good-looking. In a completely different way than her husband had been, of course, but it didn't matter what he looked like. Could he ride? Rope? Brand? Because, if he couldn't, he might as well drive that little red car back to Dallas, sooner rather than later.

He stood and extended his hand, blue eyes just like Eric's drilling through her. No humor. No friendliness. Simply assessment.

Carmen raised her chin slightly and set her groceries on the floor. "I'm fine, thank you." She shook his hand with a firm grasp. She was strong. She was capable. She didn't need a city boy here to take what was rightfully hers... or, at least, what was rightfully Juliana's. She'd show him up every step of the way until he conceded her claim and slinked back to Texas.

His eyebrows peaked, and a glint sparked in his eyes.

Oh, sure, *now* he grinned. She'd show him. She'd wipe that smirk off his face. *Later, buster.*

"Mommy, I can't reach the table." Juliana strained with the grocery bag in her hands.

With a final glare at the intruder, Carmen stepped around him and lifted Juliana's load to the table. She turned for her

own and rammed straight into a broad, solid chest. Her nostrils filled with a woody cologne. "Excuse me."

"Looking for these?" Spencer set the rest of the bags on the table. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Why did the jerk need to be polite? He'd be winning points with Uncle Howard with a chivalrous move like that. He didn't need any more. He needed a failure big enough to lose all the points he had or dreamed of attaining. She wasn't necessarily above helping him find that misstep, either.

Her conscience twitched.

Okay, fine. She wouldn't *make* him do anything stupid. No doubt he was perfectly capable of blundering all by himself. She'd simply be ready to pick up the pieces and make sure Uncle Howard noticed.

That was all.

The Cowboy's Convenient Marriage by Valerie Comer

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