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ROPING
THE TEXAN

2 Heartfelt Stories

Tyler and Calhoun

 **HARLEQUIN** SPECIAL RELEASE

CHAPTER ONE

TO TYLER JACOBS, the hot arid southeastern Arizona landscape still seemed about as welcoming as Mars, even after six weeks of working on the Double R dude ranch near Tombstone.

He was restless and vaguely depressed. He'd taken a day off to fly to Jacobsville for his sister, Shelby's, wedding to Justin Ballenger, a man she'd refused to marry years ago. Tyler was still puzzled by the courtship. They hadn't looked the picture of a happy couple, and he knew that Justin had been bitter toward Shelby for breaking their earlier engagement.

But it wasn't any of his business; he had to keep that in mind. And better to see Shelby married to Justin, who was old-fashioned enough to keep his marriage vows, than to see her mixed up with the local playboy attorney she worked for. Maybe things would work out for them. If the way Shelby had looked at Justin was any indication, they had to work out. She was obviously still deeply in love with him.

Abby and Calhoun had been at the wedding, too, and Tyler was relieved to find that his brief infatuation with Abby was over. He'd been ready to settle down and was unconsciously looking for the right kind of woman. Abby had fit the bill in every respect, but he wasn't nursing a broken heart. His eyes narrowed in

thought. He wondered if he was capable of loving a woman. Sometimes he felt that he was impervious to anything more than surface interest. Of course, there was always the woman who could hit a man hard before he knew it. A woman like Nell Regan, with her unexpected vulnerabilities and compassion...

Even as the unwelcome thought touched his mind, his pale green eyes narrowed on a rider approaching from the direction of the ranch house.

He sighed, glaring through the endless creosote bushes. They dominated the landscape all the way to the Dragoon Mountains, one of Cochise's old strongholds back in the mid-1800s. The "monsoon season" had almost passed. Today it was on the verge of a hundred degrees, and damn what they said about the dry heat not being hot. Sweat was pouring down his dark olive complexion from the sweatband of his gray Stetson, soaking his Western-cut chambray shirt. He took his hat from his jet-black hair and drew his forearm over the wetness while he got his bearings. Out here one stretch of valley looked much like any other, and the mountain ranges went on forever. If elbow room was what a man wanted, he could sure get it in Arizona.

He'd been out in the brush trying to round up some stray Hereford calves, while his worn leather chaps were treated to the double jeopardy of cholla and prickly pear cactus where the creosote wasn't so thick. Nothing grew around creosote. Having smelled the green bush, especially in the rain, he could understand why.

Before the rider got much closer, Tyler realized that it was Nell. And something was wrong, because she usually kept the length of the ranch between them. Their relationship had become strained unexpectedly, and

that saddened him. It had seemed as though he and Nell would be friends at their first meeting, when she'd picked him up at the Tucson airport. But all too soon something had sent Nell running from him.

Perhaps that was for the best. He was earning a living, but not much more, and all his wealth was gone. He had nothing to offer a woman like Nell. All the same, he felt guilty if he'd hurt her, even inadvertently. She didn't talk about the past, and neither did anyone else. But Tyler knew that something had happened to make her wary and distrustful of men. She deliberately downplayed the few attractions she had, as if she was determined not to do anything that would catch a man's eye. Tyler had gotten close to her at first, because he'd thought of her as a cute little kid. She'd been so anxious to make him comfortable, sneaking him feather pillows and all kinds of little things from the house to make him feel at home. He'd flirted with her gently, teased her, delighted in her shy company. And then, like lightning, the housekeeper had made him see that the child he was playing with was really a twenty-four-year-old woman who was misinterpreting his teasing. From that night on, he and Nell had somehow become strangers. She avoided him, except at the obligatory square dance with guests twice a month.

Nell did seem to find him useful in one respect. She still hid behind him at those every-other-Saturday-night barn dances. The way she clung to him was the only crumb left of their easy first acquaintance. But it was vaguely insulting, too. She didn't consider him a threat in any sexual way, or she'd have run screaming from his presence. He'd made some hard remarks about Nell to his sister, Shelby, but he hadn't really meant them.

He hadn't wanted anyone to realize how Nell was getting to him.

He sighed, watching her approach. Well, she wasn't dressed to fan a man's ardor, in those baggy jeans and blouse and slouch hat, and that was a good thing. He found her shyness and his odd sense of empathy for her disturbing enough without the added complication of an exquisite figure. He frowned, wondering what she looked like under that baggy camouflage. As if he'd ever find out, he thought, laughing bitterly. He'd already scared her off.

He wasn't a conceited man, but he was used to women. His money had always attracted the beautiful ones, and whatever he wanted, he got. And so, being snubbed by the stone girl stung his pride.

"Have you found those strays yet?" Nell asked with faint nervousness as she reined in beside him.

"I've only gone through five thousand miles," he murmured with soft antagonism. "Wherever they are, they're probably enjoying the luxury of enough water to drink. God knows, except in the monsoon season, they'd need a divining rod or second sight in this barren wasteland to find any."

Nell searched his hard face quietly. "You don't like Arizona, do you?"

"It's foreign." He turned his gaze toward the horizon, where jagged mountains seemed to change color as the sun shifted, first dark, then mauve, then orange. "This takes some getting used to, and I've only been out here a few weeks."

"I grew up here," she remarked. "I love it. It only looks barren. If you see it up close, there's all kinds of life."

“Horny toads, rattlesnakes, Gila monsters...” he agreed dryly.

“Red-winged blackbirds, cactus wrens, roadrunners, owls, deer,” she corrected. “Not to mention wildflowers by the score. Even the cacti bloom,” she added, and there was a sudden softness in her dark eyes, a warmth in her voice that was usually missing.

He bent his head to light a cigarette. “It looks like desert to me. How’s your trail ride coming?”

“I left the guests with Chappy,” she said with a sigh. “Mr. Howes looked as if one more bounce would put him on the ground. I hope he makes it back to the ranch.”

Tyler smiled slightly as he glanced at her rigid figure in the saddle. “If he falls off, we’ll need a crane to get him back on.”

Nell grinned without meaning to. He wouldn’t know it, but he was the first man in years who’d been able to make her smile. She was a somber, quiet woman most of the time, except when Tyler was around. Then she’d found out what he really thought of her...

“Tyler, could you take over the campout for me?” she asked unexpectedly. “Marguerite and the boys are coming for the weekend, and I have to go into Tucson and get them.”

“I can handle it, if you’ll persuade Crowbait to cook,” he agreed. “I’m not making biscuits again. I’ll quit first.”

“Crowbait isn’t so bad,” she defended. “He’s—” her dark eyes narrowed as she searched for a word “—unique.”

“He has the temperament of a cougar, the tongue of

a cobra and the manners of a bull in heat,” Tyler said shortly.

She nodded. “Exactly! He’s unique.”

He chuckled and took another draw from his cigarette. “Well, boss lady, I’d better get those strays before somebody with an itchy trigger finger has beef for supper. I won’t be long.”

“The boys want to go looking for Apache arrowheads while they’re here,” she added hesitantly. “I told them I’d ask you.”

“Your nephews are nice kids,” he said unexpectedly. “They need a firmer hand than they get, though.”

“Marguerite isn’t the ideal parent for two high-strung boys,” Nell said defensively. “And since Ted died, it’s been worse. My brother could handle them.”

“Marguerite needs a husband.” He smiled at the thought of Marguerite. She was like the life he’d been used to—sophisticated and uncomplicated and pretty. He liked her because she brought back sweet memories. She was, in fact, all the things Nell wasn’t. “But a dish like Margie shouldn’t have much trouble finding one.”

Nell knew her sister-in-law was beautiful, but it hurt somewhere deep inside to hear Tyler acknowledge Margie’s good looks. Nell was only too aware of her own limitations, of her round face and big eyes and high cheekbones. She nodded, though, and forced a smile to her unlipsticked mouth. She never wore makeup. She never did anything to draw attention to her...until recently. She’d tried to attract Tyler, but Bella’s comments had killed the notion. Tyler’s subsequent behavior had buried it.

Now Nell knew better than to make eyes at Tyler.

Besides, Margie was just his style, she thought bitterly. And Margie was interested, too.

"I'll go into Tucson, then, if you're sure about the campout. And if you can't find those strays by five, come back in and we'll let your Texas friends look for them in the morning," she added, referring to two of the older hands who shared a Texas background with Tyler and had become fast friends of his in the six weeks he'd been in residence.

"I'll find them," he said carelessly. "All I have to do is look for a puddle of water, and they'll be standing on their heads in it."

"You already know not to sit in any dips or washes," she murmured. "Out here is even worse than in Texas. It can be raining twenty miles away and the sky can be clear, and before you know it, you're in a floodplain."

"We have flash floods where I come from," he reminded her. "I know the dangers."

"I was just reminding you," she said, and hated the concern that she'd unwittingly betrayed.

His eyes narrowed and he smiled unpleasantly, stung by her condescending attitude. "When I need a nursemaid, honey, I'll advertise," he said in a pronounced Texas drawl.

Nell steeled herself not to react to what was blatantly an insult. "If you have a chance tomorrow, I'd like you to speak to Marlowe about his language. One of the guests complained that she was getting tired of hearing him swear every time he saddled a horse for her."

"Why can't you tell him?"

She swallowed. "You're the foreman. Isn't keeping the men in line your job?"

"If you say so, ma'am." He tipped his hat with faint

insolence, and she wheeled her mount too quickly, almost unseating herself in the process when she pulled on the bit too hard. She urged the horse into a trot and soothed him, stroking his mane as she apologized. She knew Tyler had seen that betraying action, and she felt even worse. She was the last person on the ranch who'd ever hurt a horse voluntarily, but Tyler had a talent for stoking her temper.

He watched her go, his cigarette smoking, forgotten, in his lean, tanned fingers. Nell was a puzzle. She wasn't like any woman he'd ever known, and she had quirks that intrigued him. He was sorry they'd become antagonists. Even when she was pleasant, there was always the reserve, the bitter holding back. She seemed to become rigid when she had to talk to him.

He sighed. He didn't have time for daydreaming. He had to find six little red-and-white-coated calves before dark. He turned his horse and moved into the thick brush.

Nell dawdled on her way back to the adobe ranch house. She wasn't anxious to have Marguerite around, but she hadn't been able to find an excuse to keep the redhead away. Tyler's remark about her sister-in-law still rankled. He found Marguerite attractive, and it wasn't because of Nell that Marguerite was finding reasons to spend time on the dude ranch. She wanted Tyler. She'd made it obvious with her flirting.

Marguerite was beautiful, all right. She was red-headed, green eyed, and blessed with a figure that looked good in anything. She and Nell got along fairly well, as long as neither of them looked back nine years. It had been Marguerite who'd helped put the scars on

Nell's young emotions. Nell had never been able to forget what had happened.

On the other hand, it wasn't until Tyler came that Nell really noticed how often Marguerite used her. She was impulsive and thought nothing of inviting her friends out to the ranch for horseback rides or of leaving her two young sons in Nell's care.

Those actions had never bothered Nell very much until lately. Recently, Nell had been feeling oddly restless and stubborn. She didn't like the idea of Marguerite coming for two weekends in the same month. She should have said so. Giving in to her sister-in-law had become a habit, the way of least resistance. But not anymore. She'd already given Marguerite some unmistakable signals that little Nell wasn't going to be walked over anymore.

Margie only came out to see the Texan, Nell was sure of it. She felt a sense of regret for what she might have felt for Tyler if he hadn't made his lack of interest so apparent. But that was just as well. Margie had made it obvious that she liked Tyler, and Nell knew she was no competition for the older woman. On the other hand, she was pretty tired of letting Margie use her for a doormat. It was time to say so.

HER SISTER-IN-LAW and her nephews, Jess and Curt, were already packed and waiting when Nell parked the Ford Tempo at the steps of their apartment. The boys, red-headed and green-eyed like their mother, made a bee-line for her. At seven, Jess was the oldest. Curt was five and already a contender for a talking marathon.

"Hi, Aunt Nell, how about taking us to hunt lizards?"