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# SHOWDOWN!

Ruth Jean Dale





# How he loved a happy ending!

At the altar, old Thom T. Taggart lifted Kit's veil and kissed away the tears of happiness dampening her cheeks. Putting her hand in Boone's, he stepped back to take his place as his grandson's best man.

The minister began to speak, 'Dear, beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God and His company ...'

Thom T. let out a sigh of pure contentment. Things couldn't have turned out better all around if he'd planned it.

Which he had.

Dear Reader,

Friends gave our marriage six months—and who could blame them? My husband-to-be and I couldn't have come from more diverse backgrounds.

He was American Indian-Filipino-Mexican, a Catholic raised primarily in the cosmopolitan Bay Area of San Francisco. I was a true small-town WASP—white Anglo-Saxon Protestant from the Ozark Mountains of Missouri.

We'd only known each other for a few months—and dated for about six weeks—when we decided to get married. Which created a whole new set of problems: he was in the U.S. Marine Corps with orders to one place and I was in the U.S. Navy with orders to another.

Undeterred, we took the plunge, even though not a single member of either family could attend (and the Navy insisted I keep a previously scheduled dental appointment only hours before the wedding). After a weekend honeymoon in Chicago, my new husband reported to his duty station and I reported to mine. For months, we saw each other only on weekends—assuming we could both get liberty.

I never thought we'd look back and laugh, but we have—many times. That rocky beginning was such a small part of our life together. We've been married more than thirty years now; we've lived all over the country, raised a houseful of kids and we've learned what “for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health” really means.

And you know what? Our friends were wrong. This marriage really *will* last “as long as we both shall live.”

Sincerely,

*Ruth Jean Dale*

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**SHOWDOWN!**

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## PROLOGUE

“A TOAST—to Daniel Boone Taggart, the man who has everything.”

Standing in the middle of the elegant living room of his New York City penthouse, Boone lifted his crystal champagne glass in a salute to his sister-in-law, Meg, for the toast, and to his brother, Jesse, for his good taste in women. Champagne wasn't Boone's drink; he'd much prefer a lager, but he'd chosen the wine for Meg—who, as it turned out, was in the early stages of pregnancy and sipping orange juice.

Beside her, Jesse tossed down the champagne as if eager to get it over with so he could go on to better things. Even wearing a well-tailored dark suit and white shirt, Jesse had the look of the West about him, with his sun-browed skin and the squint of eyes accustomed to wide open spaces.

Boone supposed he himself had lost that cowboy look—knew he had. Years spent in the East, in New York and then London, were not conducive to maintaining a down-home flavor. That was part of the price he'd paid, he thought, twirling the fragile crystal stem between his fingers. He smiled at his sister-in-law. “Nobody's got everything,” he objected mildly.

“Maybe not,” Meg conceded, “but you come darn close.” She ran her gaze around the picture-perfect room, past decorator-designed and -executed surroundings,

while ticking off support data: "Rich, young and handsome—a penthouse apartment in Manhattan, a flat in Sloane Square, a partnership in a high-powered international law firm—"

"And fightin' the women off with a stick, I bet," Jesse interjected. "Kinda funny you don't seem happier about it, kid."

"I'm happy," Boone countered, not happy at all to be called "kid" by his older brother. Overlooking a little sibling rivalry, however, he knew he *should* be happy. His life was turning out exactly the way he'd planned. He was in control. He was a success. He knew where he was going.

He liked it that way.

At least, he liked it that way most of the time. Seeing how happy Jesse and Meg were might make him wonder if he was missing anything, but it wasn't enough to make him question his life plan.

Jesse's amused glance seemed to see right through subterfuge. "Whatever you say." He waved his empty glass. "Mind if I help myself?" Without waiting for the acquiescence they both knew was coming, he crossed to the mirrored bar, pulled out a beer, snapped the cap and drank straight from the bottle.

Boone turned to Meg. "So, the two of you are off to Australia. Second honeymoon?"

Meg gave him a nod and a dazzling smile. "Once Randy's little brother or sister appears—" she patted her still-flat middle with satisfaction "—it won't be so easy to get away. Grandfather Randall wanted to take Randy with him to Newport for the summer, anyway, so..."

Jesse came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. "If there's one thing we found out the hard



way, it's that when opportunity knocks, you better answer 'cause you may not get another chance."

Meg snuggled back against him. "Which is why we're here," she added. "By the time we return, you may be gone again, Boone. We wanted to say hi and bye and bring you up to date on the family. A lot's happened in the last year."

Boone regarded her quizzically. He knew that his grandfather, Thom T., patriarch of the Taggart clan, and Meg's grandfather, John Randall, had masterminded the reunion of Jesse and Meg last summer after a separation that had dragged on for years.

Boone would have bet the outcome of his next case that forcing the estranged couple to spend time alone at the old family homestead near Hell's Bells, Texas, on the pretext of planning their young son's future, would have hastened a divorce, not prevented it.

He'd have been wrong. Meg and Jesse came out a couple again, more in love than ever. So Boone shrugged and said, "I know all about it."

"You do?" Meg looked surprised.

"We've had telephone service between England and Texas for years."

"But...!"

Jesse's arms tightened around his wife and his face took on that mulish expression Boone remembered well from childhood. "You heard the man, he knows all about it—whatever 'it' is. Tell us, hotshot, when's the last time you talked to Thom T.?"

Boone considered. "It's been a while," he conceded finally. "We connect when anything important comes up." He hesitated. "So how is Grandpa?"

"Madder'n a wet hen," Jesse retorted. "He wanted us to leave Randy with him while we were gone, but what



would he do with an eight-year-old? He seemed to think just because Kit's there—”

“Thank goodness,” Meg inserted. “At least he's not alone.”

Kit? It took Boone a second to remember the freckle-faced niece of Thom T.'s now-retired housekeeper. It must have been ten years since he'd seen the girl, or even thought about her. Now that he did, it brought a slight smile to his lips. He'd got quite a kick out of teasing the fiery-haired and fiery-tempered little girl.

“She's got a life of her own,” Meg continued. “She couldn't spend all her time chasing after Randy.”

“I didn't know Kit was back,” Boone admitted. “Last I heard she was working in Dallas or Houston or someplace.”

Jesse gave a disgusted grunt. “I thought you knew everything. Kit came back for the wedding.”

“What wedding?”

“Trey and Rachel's.” Meg frowned. “Honestly, Boone, sometimes I don't think you pay enough attention to family affairs.”

It took Boone a second to realize she meant Trey Smith and Rachel Cox. He'd known Rachel all her life; she was one of the many recipients of Thom T.'s kindness—in her case, as in many other, a college education. She'd returned to Showdown a few years ago as the town librarian.

Boone had never met Trey Smith, who was apparently some kind of Yankee shirttail relation of the Taggarts. Apparently he'd come to town and swept the redoubtable Ms. Cox off her feet and married her, all within the space of a few months. Knowing how intimidating Rachel could be, Boone figured that must make Trey Smith one hell of a man.

Meg was still talking. "And then Trey got a chance to go to Russia as stunt coordinator on a big film. When the newlyweds left in January, Kit moved back to the ranch—did you know all this? She's the school nurse in Showdown, so the last thing I'd ask her to do with her summer vacation is chase after another kid. Besides, Randy's spent quite a lot of time with Thom T. since we've been fixing up the cabin in Hell's Bells."

"That was a surprise, you two deciding to settle down on that old place way out in the middle of nowhere," Boone admitted. "How's it working out?"

"Great!" Meg and Jesse grinned at each other, and she added, "As long as I can hop a plane and fly off to civilization every so often."

Watching them was a lesson in intimacy for Boone. If ever a couple belonged together, it was these two. Yet they'd married in haste, repented in leisure, and found their way back together only through sheer luck... and a deep and abiding love.

Boone pressed his lips together in a thin line. Being around Jesse and Meg, seeing how much in love they were, made him question his own choices—at least a little. What would he do if one day he realized he'd taken a wrong turn and it was too late to go back?

THE LONGER THEY STAYED, the more melancholy Boone became. He was almost glad when they decided it was time to leave.

Lingering in the marble-floored foyer, Jesse turned to his brother. "Meg and I won't be there for Showdown Days this year, so we're kind of hopin' you can see your way clear to drop in on Thom T. long about then."

"Fourth of July—that's only a few weeks away. I don't know...."

Jesse glowered. "Wouldn't hurt you any to humor the old man. You haven't been home for Showdown Days since that summer you played Sheriff Jack."

Boone's grin was spontaneous. He had indeed played the hero, Sheriff Jack, during the annual week of festivities revolving around the legend of the lawman, the gunman and the Taggarts' great-great-great-aunt Rose. He'd been twenty-one years old, enjoying a last fling before settling down to law school and the life he'd mapped out for himself.

"I got to kiss Marcella Grant," he said, lapsing slightly into the drawl he'd fought long and hard to eradicate from his speech. "Over... and over... and over."

"Bet they'd be glad to let you do it again," Meg teased. "Funny thing is, that gunman—"

Jesse clamped one hand on her elbow. "Let it go, honey. Mr. Know-It-All knows it all, remember?" He reached past her to open the door. "Time to hit the road, amigo," he tossed over his shoulder to his brother.

Meg rose on tiptoe to plant a farewell kiss on Boone's cheek. "Kidding aside, keep an eye on Thom T. for us while we're gone, okay? He misses you."

"I miss him." Boone meant it. "I'll call more frequently, but I don't know if I'll have time to visit before the fall."

"Honestly, Boone." Meg made a face. "You just returned from months and months in London. Surely you rate a little time off."

Boone shrugged. "I suppose so, if I wanted to take it. But I can't just pick up and go at a moment's notice. That's no way to succeed in the Big Apple."

Jesse shook his head, his expression one of disgust. "That is just plain pitiful, little brother. Grandpa's not gettin' any younger."



"Yeah, I know." Boone grasped at straws. "Maybe I can get him to come here."

"Maybe pigs can fly," Jesse scoffed, his usual response to Boone's oft-expressed desire to get their grandfather to come East for a visit—or permanently.

"He'd be better off here with me," Boone argued.

"He's better off where he's happy."

"But he's getting old—he was born in 1908, as he's so fond of reminding us. We've got his health to consider."

Meg stepped between the men, taking her husband's hand firmly. "We've got his *heart* to consider, and that's planted on the Rocking T Ranch in Showdown, Texas. Now will you two stop squabbling like a couple of... brothers!"

BOONE PULLED a beer out of the bar refrigerator and carried it onto the terrace. Leaning against the balcony railing, he stared at the lights sparkling below like a handful of jewels spilled on black velvet. It was the kind of view that inspired poets.

He wasn't a poet; he was an attorney on the fast track. As Meg said, he had everything.

So why did he feel this vague discontent? Gazing out across the city, he relied on logic to reveal the source of his uneasiness.

Must be Thom T., Boone finally concluded. It wasn't right for a man that age to live way out there on the Rocking T, still a working ranch, although on a greatly reduced scale. Mostly the old man's few hired hands played nursemaid to longhorns raised for specialty purposes, and to a small herd of beef cattle under contract to some of the finest restaurants in the country. His grandfather could afford to pay for all the help he needed, sure, but that wasn't the same as relying on kin.

At least Thom T. was no longer alone in the big old Victorian ranch house. Kit . . . He smiled. She'd come to the ranch as a twelve-year-old, the same year Boone went away to college. Cute little thing. He still remembered the way she'd trailed along after him and Jesse. The summer Boone took part in Showdown Days, she'd also participated, although he couldn't remember in which role. Not a leading one, though.

It had been fun, dressing up in a white hat and strapping on a pair of six-guns. As the hero of the piece, he'd got to ride a white horse and spend a lot of time striking valiant poses while making fairly idiotic speeches. During the week-long tourist extravaganza, he'd even participated in a classic shoot-out on Main Street—the dream of every red-blooded Texas boy!

Funny, the villain of the legend—the man who, if you believed Texas legend, “died in the dirt like a yella dog”—was also named Boone. According to Thom T., “Boone” was an old family name among the Taggarts. But it was a coincidence for which Boone had occasionally spared a passing thought in his younger years.

The telephone rang and the answering machine clicked in before he could reach it. “Daniel, darling, there's going to be a *huuuuge* dinner party Friday night—”

He lifted the receiver. “I'm here, Bree.”

“Oh, good. The party's Friday night for the new exec of Borallis and Kleinsweigger. I said we'd *love* to attend—there'll be scads of important people for networking. Good for your career, darling.”

“I suppose so, but—”

“No buts. Meet me in half an hour at Trini's for a drink and I promise I'll talk you into it.” A series of smacking kiss-sounds and the line went dead.

Boone stood there, realizing again that Bree wanted to pick up where they'd left off when he went to London eighteen months ago. He wasn't sure he wanted that, but he *was* sure he didn't want to go to another damned business dinner.

He wanted to go home to Showdown. He owed it to his grandfather, sure. But the truth was, Boone had never felt as alone as he did now, standing on the brink of the professional success toward which he'd driven himself with single-minded determination for years. Success seemed somehow empty, perhaps because he had no one with whom he wanted to share it.

*But if his grandfather moved East...*

ON HIS RETURN from Trini's two hours later, Boone found another message on his answering machine, this one from a woman whose tone dripped scorn like icicles: "*Mr. Taggart*, if it's not too much trouble, your grandfather would like to speak to—"

A crackle of sound—almost like a tussle for the telephone on the other end—and then Boone instantly recognized the furious Texas drawl of his grandfather, Thom T. Taggart:

"All right, boy, you listen and you listen good. I know you're all tied up in a bunch of tanglement over *high* finance and *big* business, but it's time you hightailed it on home. You hear me? Daniel Boone Taggart, your grandpa's on his deathbed and I ain't just a-woofin'!"



## CHAPTER ONE

KIT PROPPED ONE ELBOW on the big walnut table in the middle of the dining room at the Rocking T Ranch. Her rueful glance took in the piles of paper, the colored folders, the bits and pieces of nineteenth-century memorabilia before her.

"If I didn't know better," she remarked, "I'd say this couldn't be done."

Sitting across the table, Rita Lopez straightened, pushing her granny glasses back into place on the bridge of her nose. At thirty-five, Rita was ten years older than Kit, who considered her friend one savvy lady.

Rita's smile looked forced. "Ah, but you *do* know better. Don't quit on me now, Kit. Anybody who can give vaccinations to a roomful of terrified school kids shouldn't have any trouble with this."

"But we've only got a month," Kit pointed out reasonably, "and rehearsals have barely begun."

"Which is just as well, considering that our star eloped day before yesterday with our gunslinger."

"No!" Kit fell back in her chair, realizing why Rita looked so grim. "What happened?"

"Apparently Mary Alice has been sneaking around to meet Junior for weeks—playing the parts of Rose and Boone, the Mysterious Gunslinger, in the Showdown Days pageant was just a front. From what I can gather, her father found out and went lookin' for Junior. So he and

Mary Alice headed for Las Vegas with her daddy in hot pursuit."

"Rita, we are in big trouble!"

Rita nodded. "So what else is new?" She put aside the phony "who's worried?" demeanor. "I knew when Jeannette Cunningham's daughter got sick in Waco we were in for it. I guess when you've chaired Showdown Days as long as Jeannette has, you don't see any need to start early or keep records—so after about 1982 she didn't. This is all we've got to go on." She indicated the litter on the table.

"That's enough," Kit encouraged staunchly. "Remember, everyone in town knows the story."

"Thank heaven. Because if there ever was a complete script, it's lost in the mists of time. A page here, a page there, from umpteen different versions—"

"That's what rehearsals are for, to iron out all the little wrinkles."

"Little wrinkles, she calls it, with cast members dropping like flies." Rita shook her head wearily. "I swear I don't know how Jeannette pulled this thing together every year. It's a nightmare."

"Don't worry, Rita." Kit squeezed her friend's arm sympathetically. "The town's been staging this extravaganza so long we can do it with our eyes closed."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence—I needed that." Rita dug around in the stacks until she found a yellow legal pad and a pencil. "Okay, where are we? Major characters for the pageant—Rose Taggart, the Heroine. We'll have to recast that and the role of Boone the Mysterious Gunfighter. Then we have Jack Guthrie, the Noble Sheriff; James Taggart, the Protective Brother; and his wife, Diana. Right?"

"Right," Kit agreed. "Who's playing Sheriff Jack?"

Rita grimaced. "Bud Williams."

Kit groaned. When she first returned to Showdown last winter, Bud had made a big play for her. All he'd got for his efforts was a cold shoulder. Could he play nobility? She doubted it!

"It gets worse," Rita declared. "I think we're going to have to let Harry Meeks play Boone, the Mysterious you-know-what."

"Tell me you're kidding!"

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" She didn't. "I know he's a bit long in the tooth, but considering the circumstances, we're lucky he's willing to do it."

"I suppose you're right," Kit conceded without her usual spirit. "Who else?"

"Lee Cox is James Taggart—"

"Good. That's good."

"And Jenny Merton's niece, Chelsea, who's visiting for the summer from California, will play James's wife, Diana."

They sat in silence for a moment, and then Kit asked the obvious question. "What about Rose?"

Rita sighed. "Heaven only knows. I've called an emergency meeting of the Showdown Days Committee to discuss it. We'll have to do something quick, even if we do it wrong."

That, Kit knew, was the truth; Miss Rose Taggart was the unofficial queen of Showdown Days, and all eyes would be on her. Once upon a time, Kit had dreamed of playing the part herself, but that was no more than a childhood fantasy.

To begin with, she wasn't a native of Showdown, or even a native Texan if anyone cared to get technical about it. It was just that she loved the town and the state so