



The Lawman's Noelle (Men of the West Book 31)

By Stella Bagwell

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The things you find under the mistletoe!

While running her own ranch, Noelle Barnes had encountered all sorts of surprises. But an unconscious cowboy? That was a first! Yet Evan Calhoun was no ordinary rancher. He was a lawman on the hunt for some rustlers. And with her tragic past, there was no way Noelle was going to trust herself to the long arms of the law...

From the moment he looked into her velvety brown eyes, Evan knew Noelle had secrets. Torn between admiring her independence and wanting to take care of her, Evan hadn't realized just what a hard task lassoing this cowgirl would be! Would a holiday proposal bring him all he really wanted for Christmas?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

The author of over seventy-five titles for Harlequin, Stella Bagwell writes about families, the West, strong, silent men of honor and the women who love them. She credits her loyal readers and hopes her stories have brightened their lives in some small way. A cowgirl through and through, she recently learned how to rope a steer. Her days begin and end helping her husband on their south Texas ranch. In between she works on her next tale of love. Contact her at stellabagwell@gmail.com

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Reining the bay horse to a stop on the rocky rise, No-elle Barnes stood in her stirrups and peered toward the dry wash more than a hundred yards below. The dark lump lying near those slabs of rock looked like a man! And he wasn't moving!

Was he injured or sick? Or even dead?

Her adrenaline pumping, Noelle quickly guided her horse, Driller, down the rocky slope. Along the way, she buried the lower half of her face in the woolen muffler tied around her neck and tried to ignore the early December wind whipping across the bare Nevada hills. The frigid air permeated her heavy brown ranch coat and caused her eyes to water, but she was used to being out in brutal weather. And she could hardly turn back now!

Halfway to the gulch, a sinking feeling hit the pit of her stomach. Her eyes hadn't deceived her. The object lying at the bottom of the wash wasn't an animal. It was a person!

Urging her horse to a faster gait, she wound her way downward through the rocks and sage until she reached the bank of the deep gulch. By then she could see a man lying facedown in the gravel.

Oh, my! Was he dead? What was he doing way out here? Alone?

Her heart pounding with fear, she guided Driller over the ledge and down the steep embankment. The ground was loose and the horse's hind feet slid in several places, but at that moment she wasn't concerned about either of them falling. Driller was sure-footed, and she'd ridden a horse for nearly all of her twenty-eight years.

"Come on, boy," she encouraged her trusted mount. "A little farther and we'll have it made."

Noelle had hardly gotten the words out of her mouth when, several yards up the draw, another horse nickered shrilly. Driller returned the greeting.

"We'll find your friend later," she told Driller. "Right now we need to see if we have a corpse on our hands."

At the bottom of the wash, Noelle dismounted. After tying Driller's reins to a dead juniper trunk, she hurried over to the motionless body.

Dropping to her knees, she leaned over him, but stopped short of touching any part of him. Only a portion of the left side of his face was visible, yet it was enough for Noelle to discern he was young—somewhere in his

thirties—and clean-shaven. A trickle of blood oozed through the dark chestnut hair just above his ear.

Jerking off her leather glove, she shoved away the kerchief tied around his neck and felt for a pulse. Relief flooded through her as she detected a faint but steady beat.

"Hey, mister, can you hear me? Wake up and tell me what happened."

With her property being so remote, it wasn't much use carrying a cell phone. She would either try to move this man on her own or go for help. And considering that he appeared to be at least six feet tall and somewhere close to a hundred and eighty pounds, she figured throwing him over his horse would be a mighty big chore.

Racing back to Driller, she jerked a bottle of water and a piece of ragged towel from her saddlebags. "He's out, Driller. Colder than a mackerel. If I can't wake him up, you and I might have to ride like hell to get help."

Noelle raced back to the downed man, while behind her, the horse pawed as though to tell her he understood. And she'd bet that he did. Living out here for nearly four years, with no one to talk to but her animals, she figured they'd all learned a vast human vocabulary.

The water was slushy with ice. She poured a bit onto the rag and placed it on the man's forehead, then shook his shoulder.

"Mister, can you hear me?" she practically yelled. "You need to wake up so I can get you out of this gulch."

The shock of the water coupled with her voice must have done the trick, because he suddenly moaned and attempted to lift his head from the gravel bed.

Tossing the cold cloth aside, she slipped a hand beneath his head and lowered it to the ground. "Whoa, there. Just lie still for a minute."

He continued to stir. As his head moved slowly back and forth, his eyelids fluttered open. Noelle had never been so glad to see a pair of dark green eyes, even if they weren't totally focused.

"Oh, hell—I hurt all over." Lifting a hand to the wound on the side of his head, he gazed groggily up at her. "Who are you?"

"Noelle Barnes. My property runs along the east side of this gulch. I spotted you from up on the ridge. Do you know what happened?"

Appearing to gather more steam, he braced a hand against the ground and, with Noelle supporting his shoulder, he pushed himself to a sitting position. "My head feels like someone used a claw hammer on it."

"No doubt. You have a goose egg and a gash just above your ear. I'm not a doctor, but I'm guessing you have a concussion, at least. You can move your arms and legs, so that's a good sign. Still, you need to get to a hospital."

He swiped a hand across his face and Noelle used the moment to gather more details about the man. He was dressed in dark blue jeans and a pair of brown ostrich-leather boots that probably cost more than she would

spend on food for the next six months. His heavy, olive green jacket was made of oiled canvas, and beneath the corduroy collar was a white shirt. Although he looked natural in the cowboy gear, he appeared far too neat to be a working rancher.

"I'll worry about that later." He turned his head stiffly in an effort to look behind him. "Right now, do you see my hat anywhere? And what about my horse?"

"You sit still," she ordered him. "I'll round up both of them."

She found the tan felt hat a few feet from where he'd fallen. The left side of the crown was bent in and the brim smeared with dirt, but that was the least of this man's problems at the moment. She wasn't at all sure he was feeling up to riding anywhere.

Thankfully, the horse, a black-and-white paint, wasn't far away. The moment he spotted Noelle, he walked right up to her, as though he'd already decided he and his saddle pal needed help.

After gathering his reins, she gave the animal several reassuring pats on the neck, then led him through a tangle of sagebrush and rock until they reached the man. He was still sitting on the ground, his head hanging between his knees.

"Here's your hat and your horse," she told him. "But I'd advise you to stay where you are and get your bearings before you try to stand up."

He turned an accusing eye on the horse. "This is the first time a horse has dumped me in years. That's what I get for trusting my brother when I asked him for a mount."

Noelle didn't attempt to figure out that last remark. Instead, she got straight to the point. "Do you remember what happened?"

"I do now. A sage hen or some kind of bird flew up right in front of our faces, and it must have scared the devil out of the horse. Before I knew what was happening, he was walking on his hind legs, and I was headed toward the ground. I must have hit my head on a rock or something. That's all I know until I woke up and found you standing over me."

The man was an attractive son of a gun, she thought, but not in the pretty-boy kind of way her old girlfriends down in Phoenix used to swoon over. No, this man's features were too harsh and rugged to be described as handsome or anything close to it. But the dark rusty hair falling onto his forehead was as sexy as all get-out, and so were his green eyes.

"What are you doing out here, anyway?" she asked. "This is private land."

He reached inside his coat and pulled out a leather wallet. When he flipped it open and flashed a lawman's badge at her, everything inside Noelle went cold and stiff.

If the man hadn't been injured, she would've climbed on Driller and rode away without a backward glance.

But he was dazed and hurt, and she wouldn't turn her back on anyone who needed help. Even a lawman.

"Detective Evan Calhoun, Carson City Sheriff's Office," she read aloud. "What's a detective doing out here

on my land?"

"Your land? I was on government lease, following four-wheeler tracks. I crossed over a downed fence because the tracks continued into this gulch. I never thought the fence was a boundary line. Most landowners try to keep those upright."

She huffed out a heavy breath. "The fence on the other side of this draw does need work," she admitted. "I've been using the gulch as a boundary fence."

"Well, sorry about getting onto your land." He pushed up the cuff of his jacket and squinted at a gold watch. "Damn. I've been out here way too long."

He made a move to get to his feet. Noelle felt compelled to grab his arm and give him a steady pull. Once he was standing, he swayed slightly, but with her supporting him, he managed to stay upright.

"Between the freezing weather and that whack on the head, it's a wonder you haven't gone into shock," she told him.

His gaze focused directly on her face, and Noelle felt something in her stomach do a crazy flip.

"I'm grateful that you found me," he said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Barnes. Noelle Barnes."

"Miss? Mrs.?"

She tried not to bristle at the question. It wasn't really any of his business whether she was married or single. But maybe he was thinking she had a husband back at the house who could help. Only Noelle didn't have a husband. She didn't even have a cell phone.

"Ms.," she answered curtly.

He extended his hand to her. "Well, thank you very much, Ms. Barnes. If not for you, I might still be on the cold ground."

Even with the leather acting as a barrier between their skin, the feel of his strong hand wrapping around hers was very unsettling. Her reaction had nothing to do with him being a detective for the sheriff's office.

She looked away to a spot at the far end of the gulch. "No need for thanks. Do you think you're up for a short ride? My house is only a couple of miles from here. Where did you leave your truck and trailer?"

"Farther than that. It's parked just off a county road a few miles north of here."

She eased her hand from his. "Then you'd better come with me and rest before you head on home."

"My vision is still a little blurred, but my head is clearing. I think I can ride back to my truck all right." He pulled a cell phone from a leather holder on his belt and squinted at the flat screen, then muttered something under his breath. "I'm having trouble focusing, but it looks to me like I'm not receiving a signal of any kind. This thing is useless out here."

"Which is why I never bother with one," she replied.

He jammed the phone back into the holder. "Okay, I'll forget that plan. If you'd be kind enough to call the sheriff's office when you get home, just let them know I'm okay and will be getting back late."

In spite of being uncomfortable in this man's presence, she shook her head. He hardly looked well enough to ride to his truck. It was going to be difficult for him even to get to her house.

"Forget it," she said flatly. "I'd be stupider than you are if I let you ride off in the condition you're in."

"Look, Ms. Barnes, I—"

"Call me Noelle. And right now you're in no shape to argue. If necessary, I figure I could manhandle you." She pulled his horse forward and slipped the reins over the animal's neck. "See if you can mount up. We're going to my place."

Apparently deciding he might be smart to take her advice, he took a step toward the horse and immediately swayed. Noelle grabbed his arm to prevent him from collapsing. With his chin resting on his chest, he pulled in several long breaths.

"I think you might be right," he said in a strained voice. "I don't feel so great."

Fearing he was going to pass out, she slipped an arm around his waist and held him tightly. "Do you need to sit down? There's no hurry. We can try this in a few minutes."

"No. Just let me get my foot in the stirrup and then give me a shove up."

If nothing else, he was determined, Noelle thought. She twisted the stirrup around to give him easier access. "I hope your paint doesn't decide to move. He might end up dragging you into the next county."

"If he does, I'll come back to haunt my brother Finn," he muttered.

To her relief, he managed to get his foot in the stirrup. With one hand against his back and the other on his butt, she pushed until he plopped into the saddle with a heavy thud.

Hurrying around to the right side of the horse, she fixed his other boot into the stirrup, then handed him the reins. By now he was half slumped over the saddle horn, his face the color of putty.

"Are you going to fall off?" she asked with concern.

He responded with a dismissive wave. "Get your horse. I'll make it."

There was nothing more she could do now, Noelle decided as she hurried over to Driller. Except pray that he could hang on long enough to reach the warmth and safety of her house.

Once in the saddle, she turned Driller down the draw. The paint obediently fell into step behind her. Thank God the horse wasn't behaving like a wild bronco. Now she had to find an easier trail for them to climb the steep bank of the gulch. Otherwise, the lawman might tumble off his horse again. She seriously doubted his head could survive another impact.

Unfortunately, as the draw narrowed, the steepness of the bank increased. A hundred yards from where they'd started, she pulled Driller to a stop to look back at the lawman. If the situation hadn't been so serious, she would've been inclined to smile at the cockeyed angle of his hat and the dazed look on his face. But a head injury could be deadly. She wanted to get him out of the cold and to medical help as quickly as she could.

"Looks like we'd better climb the cut bank here before the trail gets any steeper," she told him. "And hang on. I don't want to have to pick you up off the ground and throw you over the saddle."

"Yes, ma'am. Just lead on."

The climb made three switchbacks through a patch of scrubby juniper and creosote bushes. Throughout the ascent, Noelle kept glancing behind her, expecting at any moment to see him listing precariously from one side of the horse to the other. But thankfully, he managed to keep his seat until they reached the top. She sighed with relief.

From this point on, the trail wasn't nearly as challenging. Barring an incident with his horse, they'd be at her place in a half hour. And then what was she going to do with him?

Users Review

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