

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired[™]

A man wearing a black cowboy hat with a silver band and a grey t-shirt sits on a green wooden chair on a porch. He is looking at a woman with long, wavy reddish-brown hair who is wearing a purple short-sleeved top and jeans. She is holding a white mug and looking back at him. They are sitting on a wooden deck in front of a log cabin. The background shows green trees and a bright sky.

The Rancher's
City Girl
Patricia Johns

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«HarperCollins»

Johns P.

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Healing the Cowboy's Heart When Cory Stone discovers the father he never met is gravely ill, he brings the ornery man to his Montana ranch, along with his round-the-clock nurse. Once again Cory finds himself falling for the wrong woman—a city slicker, like the ex-fiancée who broke his heart. But in Eloise LeBlanc, Cory also finds a kindred spirit. The caring beauty knows firsthand about love and loss. Neither of them is looking for a new romance, and Cory certainly isn't searching for love. But can the independent city girl heal the heart of a broken cowboy?

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“That's the last time I ride a horse.”

Eloise wiped the last of the tears from her cheeks with her palms.

Cory led the horses toward the barn door and Eloise beelined toward the fence.

He could hear the guffaws of the ranch hands already—if he chose to tell the story, that was. They loved a good city slicker story. He wouldn't tell it, though. He knew that already. She might not be much of a cowgirl, but she didn't deserve to be mocked.

Don't fall for her, he chided himself. As she walked away, her fiery curls whipping in the wind, he led the horses into the barn.

“Lexie,” he murmured to his horse. “You should have known better than to gallop with her.” But it wasn't the horse's fault, nor Eloise's. It was his, for having expected something that he never should have hoped for.

Why was he doing this to himself? He had to stop this—whatever it was between them.

But right now nothing short of divine intervention would make him stop falling for her.

PATRICIA JOHNS

willfully became a starving artist after she finished her BA in English literature. It was all right, because she was single, attractive and had a family to back her up “just in case.” She lived in a tiny room in the downtown core of a city, worked sundry part-time jobs to keep herself fed and wrote the first novel she would have published.

That was over ten years ago, and in the meantime, she's had another ten novels published, and her dedication to the written word hasn't diminished.

She's married, has a young son and a small bird named Frankie. She couldn't be happier.

The Rancher's City Girl

Patricia Johns



www.millsandboon.co.uk

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
—Psalms 73:26

To my husband, John,
who is my inspiration for all my heroes. I love you!

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A knock on the front door echoed through the small house. Eloise Leblanc glanced quickly toward her patient. Robert Bessler lay on crisp, clean sheets, his papery eyelids closed in sleep. A fan oscillating in the corner shifted his white hair against his forehead, but he didn't stir.

Eloise pushed herself up from the chair next to his bed and stepped into the hall, angling her steps toward the front door. She paused at the door, tucking a fiery curl back into the loose bun at the base of her neck, then stood on her tiptoes to peek through the peephole. A tall man looked down, his face obscured by a cowboy hat.

Eloise paused for a moment and sucked a deep breath.

This is it.

She opened the door and the man lifted his gaze to meet hers in frank evaluation. He pulled off his hat and held it across his chest. His hair hung in dark, disheveled waves across his forehead and his piercing dark eyes sparkled. A dusting of stubble softened his chiseled features, and he smiled hesitantly.

"Hi," he said. "Is this the home of Robert Bessler?"

"It is."

"You must be Eloise. We spoke on the phone."

"Of course. Cory?"

He nodded and she stepped back, allowing him entrance. "Your father is sleeping right now. Would you like to have a seat and wait for a few minutes?"

"Thank you."

Eloise performed a veiled inspection as Cory Stone stepped past her and into the small entryway. She'd only moved to the town of Haggerston six months earlier for the job with Mr. Bessler. She'd grown up in Billings, the largest city in Montana, and while she was well acquainted with

cowboys—what Montana girl wasn't?—she still felt a sense of admiration when she saw the real thing. He loomed head and shoulders taller than she was, and his cowboy boots clunked solidly against the hardwood floor. A hint of musk lingered near, and despite his wide shoulders and obvious strength, he moved with ease.

"Please sit down." Eloise gestured into the sitting room, and the big man dwarfed the sofa as he sank into its depths.

"How is my father doing?" Cory asked.

"He doesn't have much strength left, and he's in a lot of pain," she replied, perching on the edge of a chair opposite him. "It's better to let him sleep when he's able to. Sometimes the pain keeps him awake, so the more rest he can get, the better."

Cory nodded. "It's okay. I don't want to wake him up."

"He doesn't know I called you." Eloise blushed and cleared her throat. "So this will be a little delicate."

A grin broke over the man's face. "I'll be a surprise, then."

"That's one way to put it."

"So, how did you find out about me?" he asked.

"From him."

"My father told you about me?" Cory raised his eyebrows.

Eloise paused, unsure how much information to divulge. "He always said he had no family, so when he mentioned a son, I did an online search. I was a little surprised to find you as quickly as I did. I thought it best to tell you that there wasn't much time left if you wanted to connect with him."

Cory nodded slowly and fiddled with the edge of his hat. His hands were calloused and rough, nothing like Eloise's ex-husband's smooth fingers. She swatted back the memories, irritated with how quickly they seemed to rise lately. Philip had left her for another woman two years ago. He'd moved on with the woman, but obviously, if Eloise was comparing a rugged rancher to her lawyer ex-husband, she wasn't as over him as she'd like to think.

"You didn't say how much time he has when we spoke," Cory said.

Eloise pulled her attention back to the task at hand. "I don't know. His cancer is aggressive and he's refused more treatment. So it won't be very long."

"How long have you worked for him?"

"For the past six months." Eloise glanced in the direction of Mr. Bessler's bedroom. "Your father is a very complicated man, but he has a softer side, too. I'm sure you know that."

"I don't know him at all," Cory admitted. "I've never met him."

"Never?" Eloise sucked in a breath. "You didn't think to mention that on the phone?"

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew."

"He'll be angrier than I thought." She smiled wanly and tucked that stray curl behind her ear once more. "I'd just assumed that you would have seen him at some point from the way he talked about you."

Cory looked uncomfortable. "No, ma'am. He was out of the picture before I was even born."

"I suppose I should warn you, then. The medication doesn't control the pain as well as it used to, so—"

"He's cantankerous?"

Eloise nodded. "He doesn't mince words."

"Thanks for the heads-up."

Eloise pushed the feeling of dread back down into her stomach. She'd gone through this scenario in her head a hundred times since their telephone conversation, but not once did she imagine she'd orchestrate the meeting between a son and father who had never laid eyes on each other.

This is so much worse than I thought...

A thin voice wavered from the bedroom, "Red?"

Eloise forced a smile and stood. "It looks like he's awake now. I'll be back."

As she left the room, her heart hammered in her chest. A week ago, this seemed like the best course of action, but now she wasn't so sure. Not that it mattered—the time of reckoning had come. She wished she could close her eyes and be anywhere else—a play, perhaps, or in a bustling little coffee shop in downtown Billings, a city big enough to swallow her up. Instead it was time to face the consequences of her phone call to Cory Stone.

Entering the bedroom, she found Mr. Bessler struggling to sit up, and he grunted with effort. Eloise hurried forward and helped him the rest of the way. He nodded his thanks, his breath coming in short gasps. Eloise put the breathing tubes in his nose and turned on the flow of oxygen-rich air.

"Where are my pills?" he muttered, and she pushed a paper cup of pills forward. He tipped them into his mouth with a shaky hand and slurped the water she offered him. He shut his eyes, inhaling through his nose.

"You slept for a few hours," Eloise said quietly. "How do you feel now?"

"No better. I'm dying." He opened his eyes to shoot her an irritated look.

"You aren't gone yet, Mr. Bessler." She took the cup away.

"I heard voices in the other room." He turned his head toward the wall. "You have a boyfriend visit when I sleep?"

"Hardly." She chuckled. "You give me too much credit for a personal life."

"Then who is it?" the old man demanded.

"A visitor for you."

"Who?"

Eloise turned her back to get the old man's slippers and brought them by the bed, then busied herself with his wheelchair.

"Do you want to come out to the living room to talk to him?" she asked. "Or would you rather have him come in here?"

"I'll go out there." Mr. Bessler pushed himself up and allowed Eloise to steady him as he slid his feet into the slippers. "Why on earth would I have somebody into my bedroom? Can't a man have any privacy?" He grumbled until he was settled in his chair.

"Ready now?" Eloise asked cheerily.

"Who is it?" he repeated.

"You'll see," she replied as she wheeled him out into the hallway.

"If there are balloons and a cake, you're fired," he muttered, and Eloise chuckled.

"I would expect nothing less."

As Eloise rolled Mr. Bessler's chair into the room, Cory rose. He towered over the small sitting room, broad shoulders blocking out the light from the window behind him. A piano sat against one wall, and doilies adorned every surface from side tables to the back and arms of the couch—Mr. Bessler's late wife's addition to the decor. Cory scrubbed a hand through his dark hair and he looked dark, pensive eyes on the old man.

"Whatever you're selling," Mr. Bessler said, "I'm not interested."

Cory's gaze flickered toward Eloise, then back to his father. "I'm Cory Stone."

Eloise settled her patient by the couch. She held her breath, utterly unsure of what to expect from her charge. For a long moment, no one said a word; then Mr. Bessler broke the silence.

"Your mother gave you her last name. Seems appropriate."

"She thought so," Cory agreed.

"And why are you here?" the old man queried.

"To meet you. You're my father."

"To get my estate, perhaps?" Mr. Bessler held up one finger and wagged it in his son's direction. "You think I owe you something?"

A dark look crossed Cory's face, and the muscles along his jaw tensed. "I've done well for myself. I don't need your money."

"That's good, because you aren't in my will."

Cory glanced at Eloise, eyebrows raised questioningly. Mr. Bessler scowled, and Eloise bent down close to her patient's ear.

"Mr. Bessler," Eloise murmured. "I know this is a shock, and I'm sorry about that. But this is your son."

"You're a quick one," the old man quipped.

"If you've ever wanted to speak to him, tell him something—this is your chance. You've mentioned him before, and time isn't on our side."

"It's me who has no time," he retorted. "You've got plenty."

Eloise let his comment pass, knowing from experience that he expected no reply.

The old man turned his attention to Cory. "So, what exactly do you want?"

"You're my father." Cory cleared his throat. "I wanted to—"

"Why now?" the old man interrupted. "I'm dying, you know."

Cory didn't answer.

"But you seem to know that." Mr. Bessler twisted in his chair to cast a scathing glare at Eloise, then shook his head slowly. "You called him, didn't you, Red?"

Mr. Bessler had called Eloise "Red" since her first day on the job. Lately, he'd consented to use her proper name, but the old nickname gave his words a deeper sense of betrayal.

"Yes, sir, I did," she admitted. "You've been lonely, and when you mentioned your son—" She swallowed the hot, rising anxiety. She'd crossed a line in calling her patient's son without his permission. She was here to help keep the old man comfortable. Her job did not include manipulating her patient into confrontations he wanted to avoid, no matter her intentions. While she'd truly believed that Mr. Bessler wanted to reconnect with his only son, it appeared now that she had been wrong and for one fleeting moment she wished she could go back in time and undo that phone call to Cory Stone.

"I see." The old man turned around. He nodded several times, eyeing the big man before him. "You're fired, Red," he said, his gaze pinned to his son instead of the woman he was addressing. "I won't require your services any longer."

* * *

Fired? Cory's gaze snapped between the hunched old man and his pretty nurse. Eloise blinked twice before she looked down, her long lashes veiling those deep green eyes from his scrutiny.

"Fired?" Eloise's tone registered little surprise. "Mr. Bessler, you fire me once a week. You don't really mean that, do you?"

"Why would I want a nurse who lies to me?" he barked.

"I didn't lie."

"You went behind my back," he retorted.

"Yes, sir, I did. And I'm sorry about that. It was an error in judgment. I really did think you would appreciate this last chance to know your son."

"Did you?" His voice dripped with sarcasm.

"If I'm fired, then I'll call the agency to find you another nurse." She rose to her feet and started to walk from the room, but his father heaved a sigh.

"You aren't fired," he muttered. "Come back."

She stopped, smiled and brushed a spiral curl away from her cheek. Cory didn't know her at all, but he had a good instinct when it came to character, and Eloise seemed like a good person. His father, however, hadn't exactly endeared himself yet.

Cory had expected someone more impressive. His mother had always described his father as a strong, powerful man, but this quivery gentleman looked nothing like the father he'd imagined. Frail. Old. Ornerly.

I should be at the ranch, trying to find a medic to replace the guy who quit, he thought dismally. What am I doing here? I have a hundred better things I should be doing...

Eloise moved over to the couch and sat down. She idly adjusted a doily across the arm of the couch. The same errant curl she'd just brushed from her face fell back against her creamy skin, and Cory found his attention fixed on her. Her composure surprised him.

"So she's still your nurse?" Cory clarified.

"What is that to you?" his father asked. "I can fire her if I want to."

Eloise's gaze flicked up at Cory, and she glanced quickly between both men but didn't speak.

"Do you feel like a big man when you cast women aside?" Cory couldn't veil the chill in his tone.

"Is that your way of asking about your mother?" the old man demanded. He coughed and slouched lower in his chair.

"No," Cory said. "My mother told me enough."

"What a horrible man I was?" his father asked with a bitter smile.

"No, she thought more of you than that."

"Where is she now?"

"She passed away a few years ago." Images of his mother's last days filled his mind. She'd died in a hospital, a gaunt figure, pain medication pumping into an IV that left a purple bruise over her bony hand. Her hair had begun to grow back in soft gray curls over her head—chemotherapy had been abandoned at that late stage of the illness. His mother had slipped away one afternoon, dying while he was out getting a breath of fresh air. He'd never fully forgiven himself for that.

His father frowned and dropped his gaze. "I'm sorry."

"Me, too," Cory said, but words could never encompass the feelings that welled up inside him when he remembered his mother's passing.

"What took her?"

"Breast cancer." Cory sat down on a chair and turned it to face his father. He hadn't decided how much he wanted to tell this virtual stranger about his time with his mother, but he had some questions of his own that he'd been waiting a lifetime to ask. He cleared his throat. "I know you don't want any kind of relationship with me, and that's fine, but I had a few things I wanted to ask you."

"Fair enough," his father replied.

"When did you meet my mother?" Cory asked.

"I don't want to talk about her."

Irritation plucked at his practiced calm. "Why not?"

He was met with a chilly silence. Eloise shifted in her seat, and Cory glanced toward her to find her green eyes full of compassion. Her pink lips parted, and he was struck anew by her unaffected beauty. Cory pulled his gaze away from her and tapped his hat against his thigh.

A smile flickered at the corners of the old man's lips. "Are you married, boy?"

Cory shook his head.

"Then I can't expect you to understand."

"Were you married when you met my mother?"

Another silence, but it seemed to answer his question.

"And you chose your wife over my mother?"

His father gave a weak shrug. "Someone had to be hurt, young man. Either your mother or my wife. I chose to protect my wife."

It explained a lot. Cory's mother had never told him much about the relationship she shared with his father, only that it was a short fling and that it hadn't lasted after she told him she was pregnant. He let his gaze move over the walls of the little sitting room, and he spotted a few faded pictures of a woman with a 1960s' hairstyle at various ages. She had a bright smile and a slim figure.

"Is that your wife?" he asked, nodding at the picture.

"Never mind Ruth," the old man snapped. "She isn't your business."

That was true, Cory knew. He wasn't even sure what to ask the old man now. He'd had a million questions over the years, but now as he faced his father, he couldn't seem to pull them out of the tangle of his emotions. One thought shot through the murky mess in his mind: *I'm the child of an affair.*

The thought had occurred to him in the past but had never been verified. Cory had preferred to believe that his mother had met a man and the relationship had simply gone sour, not that she'd been the other woman in someone else's marriage.

"I guess that's it." Cory shrugged, shoving away his disappointment. He'd driven for two hours, at the worst possible time to leave the ranch, just to meet his father. He hadn't expected tears and hugs exactly, but he'd hoped for something—some sort of connection that would identify them as father and son. So far, he'd met with only cold disdain. "There's a lot I want to know, but you don't seem willing to talk. I'm not going to beg. Is there anything you want to know about me?"

The old man shook his head. "No."

"All right, then." Cory rose and tapped his hat against his palm. This wasn't going the way he'd expected, and while he didn't want to simply walk away from his father, he had the undeniable urge to be by himself. If he were back at the ranch, he'd get on his horse and ride, but here his options were limited. He searched the old man's lined face once more for some sign of softness but found nothing. "Thank you for your time."

Eloise sprang to her feet, but when he looked in her direction, annoyance flashed in her green eyes. She planted her hands on her slim hips and darted a look between the two men.

"That's it?" she demanded.

Both men looked at her mutely. Cory wasn't sure what she expected him to do.

"This is how you want to leave it?" She pulled the curls out of her eyes and shook her head. "Sit down."

Cory stared down at the petite woman in surprise. She raised her eyebrows at him expectantly, and he briefly considered turning his back on her, but he discarded the thought almost immediately. He sank back into his seat.

"After all these years, you can't just leave things like this."

"Sure we can," his father countered. "We've met. We've talked. We're done."

Eloise pointedly ignored the old man's retort and turned her bright gaze onto Cory. "Now, Cory, what do you do for a living?"

"I own a ranch."

"See, Mr. Bessler? That's an interesting career, isn't it?" She pulled up a chair and sat on the edge. "And what drew you to that line of work?"

"I grew up on that ranch. I inherited it."

"Does Mr. Bessler have any grandchildren?" she pressed.

"No, never married. I don't have any kids."

His father shifted uncomfortably. "What do you think you're doing?" the old man asked angrily, putting a hand on Eloise's arm.

She patted his hand. "You want to know about your son, Mr. Bessler. You're just too stubborn to admit it. You'll regret it if you just let him walk out that door."

The old man settled back into his chair glumly.

"Did you always know you wanted to work a ranch?" Eloise asked, her voice low and encouraging. She gave him an eager look, and Cory couldn't find it in himself to disappoint her. He heaved a sigh.

"Pretty much. We used to visit my grandfather on his ranch every summer. I loved the horses. I was riding before I could walk."

A smile flickered at the corners of her lips. "What about your childhood? What was it like?"

"I survived." Cory's mind went back to the years with his single mother. "We weren't rich, but my mother always found a way to stretch a penny. She was a strong woman."

“Did you miss your father?”

Cory had missed his father every day of his life. His mother had done an admirable job of raising him, but not a day went by that Cory hadn't wondered about his dad. He didn't dare mention his unquenchable curiosity with his mother, though. The few times he'd asked questions about his father, she avoided answering him, and her eyes filled with pain. No boy wanted to hurt his mother. So he wondered silently if his father ever thought about him. He didn't want to share that right now, though. Not with an old man who cared so little about his existence.

The old man heaved a guttural cough. Eloise looked in his direction for a moment, then turned her attention back to Cory. “Did you know about your father when you were young?”

“I didn't know much. My mother told me I wasn't to bother about him.”

“Did you ever want to contact him?” she inquired.

Cory used to lie in bed at night as a boy, painting mental pictures of some sort of superman who would swoop into his life with a terrific excuse for his lengthy absence. He smiled sadly. “It doesn't matter.”

“Fathers always matter,” she replied.

The old man sat limply in his wheelchair, sunken eyes regarding him with trepidation. Cory smiled his thanks to the pretty nurse and met the old man's wary gaze.

“Did you ever think about me?” he asked.

His father was silent.

“Did you know when I was born?”

“Your mother sent me a card. At the office. You were born February twelfth.”

“So you knew you had a son.”

He nodded. “I knew.” He licked his dry lips with a pasty tongue. “Of course I thought about you. You can't just forget something like that.”

“But you never contacted me.”

His father shook his head. “It was for the best.”

For the best. Cory dropped his gaze. How it could possibly be in his best interest, he couldn't tell. Unless the old man was referring to his own interests.

“You didn't pay any child support, either,” he pointed out. “My mother could have used the extra money.”

“And you want that money now?” the old man asked.

“I'm not asking for anything from you.” Cory squeezed his hat between his hands, anger rising like a salve to cover that old aching wound inside of him. “I'm the sole owner of a large chunk of property, and I can assure you that I'm not sniffing around for cash.”

His father's shoulders slumped and he leaned back in his chair with a wheeze. His lids drooped. “I don't want to do this anymore. I'm tired.”

The old man didn't seem to be addressing anyone in particular, but Eloise rose from her seat and bent down next to him.

“Would you like to go back to bed?” she asked quietly.

“No, I want to just sit there in the sun.”

She released the locks on his wheels and eased his chair toward a pool of sunlight by a window. She bent and spoke to him in low tones. Cory stood and moved toward the door, watching the young woman as she conversed with his father. Her expression remained respectful, and after a few moments, she pulled a blanket over his knees and came back to the door where Cory waited for her.

“He doesn't have a lot of strength left,” she explained softly.

“I doubt he'd have responded much differently if he were well,” Cory replied.

She shrugged. “Maybe not. I'm sorry about all this.”

Cory opened the front door. “Care to walk me out, ma'am?”

She chuckled at his formality.

“Mr. Bessler, I’ll be back in just a moment,” she said and stepped outside.

Once in the warm summer sunlight, Cory inhaled the fresh air in relief. Inside the house smelled of sickness and medicine, and as he stepped out, he longed to get back to the wide-open spaces of pasture and farmland—back to his more immediate problem of a medic who quit without notice, leaving the ranch without any medical care. He turned his attention to the petite nurse.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “You risked a lot to make that happen.”

She arched her eyebrows at him quizzically. “I did?”

“Your job.”

“Oh, that.” Color rose in her cheeks. “Don’t worry, Cory. I’ve still got a job. He and I have a bit of a complicated relationship, but it works.”

“That’s a relief.” He shot her a wry grin. “I don’t like to see a lady treated that way.”

“He’s dying.” She paused, silent for a moment. “He’s scared.”

“You still made a conversation with him possible,” he said. “I’m grateful.”

“You’re very welcome. Are you coming back?”

“I can’t stay.” His mind flooded with things he had to do. He’d driven out to Haggerston at the worst time possible.

Eloise blinked in surprise. “That’s too bad. I’d hoped you two might have more time together.”

“We’re calving.” He expected those words to suffice, but she didn’t react with the knowing nod he expected.

“Oh.” The look on her face told him she didn’t understand.

“It’s busy,” he explained. “Calving is delicate—sometimes the cows need help, sometimes not.” He waved it off. “Suffice it to say, I can’t leave that kind of work to my partner. It’s twenty-four-hour mayhem for the next little while. Not to mention, our medic quit just before I left. I have to get back.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” Eloise gave him an apologetic smile. “Thanks for making the trip, even for a short stay.”

A short conversation didn’t even begin to answer all the questions he’d been storing up, but he couldn’t stay longer. Maybe if his father weren’t dying he wouldn’t have felt the urgency, but it was now or never.

“I...uh—” Cory cleared his throat. “I know my father probably won’t agree to this, but I thought I might invite the two of you to come back with me for a couple of weeks.”

“To the ranch?”

“I own about eight hundred acres in Blaine County—Milk River runs right through it. It’s the best that Montana has to offer.” He slapped his hat against his leg, searching for the right words. “I really want to get to know my father better, and I still have all these questions. I mean, not that I could remember them in there.” He looked away for a moment, toward the ill-kept yard. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’d like more time with my father, but I can’t stay away from the ranch any longer. If you’d come back with me, maybe that could still happen. Besides, you know him better than I do. You can get him to talk where I can’t.”

Cory also wanted a chance to get to know this pretty nurse a little better, but he wasn’t about to say that out loud. Eloise regarded him with a thoughtful gaze.

“I feel responsible for how this turned out.” She blushed. “This is all pretty much my fault, you know.”

“Oh, absolutely.” He shot her a wry grin. “But in the best way possible, of course.”

She laughed softly. “I can ask if he’d be willing to visit—”

Cory’s phone blipped and he pulled it out of his pocket and glanced down at a text from his partner. He clenched his teeth in frustration.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Another injury. One of the cowboys got his arm caught in the bridle of a spooked horse. They’ll have to take him to the next ranch over to get treated by their medic—”

“Does this sort of thing happen often?” Eloise asked, frowning.

“You wouldn’t...” He paused, uncertain if he should even voice the idea. “Look, I know this is a bit forward, but if you and my father came to the ranch for a visit, would you consider a little extra work?”

“Replacing your medic?” she asked.

“For a couple of weeks, until we can hire someone. I’d be eternally grateful on both counts, if you’re interested.”

“I’ll have to talk to your father and his doctor first, of course. If they agree, I’d be happy to lend a hand. You sound like you’re in a bind.”

He nodded. “Let me know. I’ll have to head back tomorrow.”

Cory dropped his hat onto his head and looked back at the house. Robert Bessler was nothing like what he’d expected, yet the chance to understand the miserable old man snagged at that boyhood longing.

Not to mention Eloise. She was beautiful, brave, confident—and the only person who actually knew his elderly father right now, and he had a feeling that her insights would be invaluable.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I can,” she promised and offered a smile. “It was really nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” He held out his hand and took her slender hand in his. “Take care.”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, reluctantly releasing her. She fluttered her fingers in a wave and turned back toward the door. As he trotted down the steps and strode to his pickup truck, Cory sighed.

Lord, he prayed silently, I hope this isn’t a mistake.

Chapter Two

The rest of the day, Cory shopped for items needed at the ranch. He bought two massive bags of dry dog food, about ten packs of socks for the ranch hands and a few cases of canned food. A trip into town couldn’t be wasted. By late afternoon, with errands completed, he found himself in a produce store, staring at the seasonal fruit.

He hoped that Eloise would take him up on his offer and come with his father out to the ranch. As much as he wanted time with his dad, though, his mind kept moving back to the pretty redhead. He found himself wondering about her as a woman. What did she do when she wasn’t working? Did she have anyone special in her life right now? He hadn’t noticed a wedding ring, but then that wasn’t the surefire signal it used to be.

Cory chose several peaches from a pyramid of fragrant clingstones and dropped them into a bag. He fumbled with the bag as he tied it shut, then moved on to the next bin—plums.

Lord, this visit to see my dad didn’t turn out the way I expected. I thought he’d care more, somehow. But you know him, Father. Open doors here. We don’t have a lot of time.

As he headed to the counter to pay, a flash of red curls caught his eye, and he turned in surprise. Eloise shot him a smile.

“Hi, stranger,” she said. She still wore the same jeans from earlier, her embroidered top revealing the barest hint of her collarbone.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

She hoisted a bag of apples. “I’m making a pie tonight after the house cools off.”

“Sounds good.” Cory put his purchases on the counter and nodded to hers. “My treat.”

Eloise smiled shyly and she put her bag down with his while he paid. The cashier’s bracelets jangled as she weighed the fruit. She gave Cory his change and he and Eloise moved toward the door together.

“The doctor gave us the go-ahead to come to your ranch,” Eloise said. “If there is anything your father wants to do, this is the time to do it.”

“That’s great.” Cory inwardly winced. That came out wrong. There didn’t seem to be any right way to say things when it included someone facing death. Eloise didn’t seem to notice.

“Mr. Bessler hasn’t made his decision yet...” She gave him a sympathetic smile.

“I do have to head back tomorrow.”

“I’ll talk to him when I get back and give you a call.”

“Does that mean he’s alone right now?” he asked.

“No, an agency sends hospice volunteers to spend time with him. It gives me some time to myself.”

The door to the grocery store shut behind them and they stepped into the glare of the afternoon sun. The scent of petunias from hanging planters mingled comfortably with the warm summer air. Shops on Main Street had kept their doors propped open and a local talk-radio show filtered out from the open door of a stationery shop, the DJ chatting away about Meagher County weather and an upcoming heat wave. Montana would serve up a hot, satisfying summer.

“I’m getting in the way of that time on your own, aren’t I?” Cory tipped back his hat and grinned.

“Not at all. It’s nice to have some company.”

“What were you going to do with your time off?”

Eloise paused, shrugged. “I hadn’t decided yet. Just go where the day takes me.”

He felt a smile come to his lips. “Would you care for a walk?”

“Sure.”

Cory put the bags of fruit in his truck on the way past, and they ambled up the street together. The clunk of his boots interspersed with the soft slap of her delicate sandals.

“It mustn’t have been easy to hear about your parents.” Eloise’s voice was so quiet that he almost didn’t catch her words.

“I guess there are two sides to every story,” he said. “I don’t know what I expected. My mother always held on to him, somehow. Wouldn’t say a bad word about him. He was my father and that counted for something. To her, at least.”

“He cares. He just doesn’t know how to say that.”

“I didn’t know he was married when they—” Cory cleared his throat.

“Maybe your mother didn’t know, either,” she suggested.

He nodded. He hoped that was the case, at least. It was too late to ask his mother now, but the idea that she’d been involved in someone else’s marriage tarnished something for him.

“His version doesn’t jibe with what I was told all my life,” Cory said finally. “My mother told me that my father had swept her off her feet. He was kind, knowledgeable. She said that ultimately the age difference had been too much. But that he was a good man, and she wished things had been different—for all of us.”

“But she didn’t want you to contact him?”

“She said it was better to give him his space. I accepted that. Looking back on it now, I can’t help wondering if she wanted to avoid facing his wife. Maybe she was ashamed.”

Eloise didn’t answer, and she looked down, her hair, now loose in the gentle breeze, obscuring his view of her face.

“Regardless, she loved him,” Cory said with a shrug.

Eloise looked up, pulling her hair back with a sweep of one hand. “You resent that, don’t you?”

“What was the use?” he asked. “He didn’t love her back. She spent a lifetime still caring about that man, and for what? He was married to someone else and saw her as nothing but an error in judgment.”

Eloise’s brow furrowed, and when the breeze shifted some curls away from her face, he thought he detected sadness in those green eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice low.

“Fine.” A smile flickered to her lips and she turned her attention in his direction.

“Liar.” The smile hadn’t reached her eyes.

Eloise sighed, and she didn’t seem inclined to answer at first. After a moment of silence, she said, “My husband left me for his mistress.”

A rush of regret hit Cory like a blow to the gut. Here he’d been, trying to untie the knot of his parents’ affair, and this poor woman was the collateral damage of another affair. He winced. “I’m sorry. I’m being really callous.”

“No, not at all.” Eloise waved it off. “These things happen, I guess.”

“No, they don’t.” Cory caught the bitterness in his own tone. “People don’t just accidentally cheat on a spouse. It’s not like a lightning strike or a tsunami.”

Eloise’s voice was soft. “Good point. But my situation isn’t your father’s, and I don’t want to mix in my personal baggage.”

“If it helps, I think your ex-husband must be an idiot,” he said.

“It kind of does.” She laughed quietly.

“So, what do you normally do on your days off?”

“I paint.”

Cory raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Houses?”

“No, artistically. Pictures.” She laughed and shook her head. “It’s therapeutic. I’ve loved painting ever since I was a child, but I didn’t take it very seriously until Philip left.”

“Did it help you deal with all of that?” he asked.

Eloise nodded. “I realized that I’d done a lot for Philip in our marriage, and not a lot for myself. That needed to change. It’s only been a couple of years, but at least I’m honoring my gifts now.”

“Where’s your ex-husband?”

“He has a law practice in Billings. He’s remarried. They have a two-year-old daughter.”

He squinted in the afternoon sunlight—the math not lost on him. “He left you for the pregnant girlfriend?”

Eloise nodded. “Afraid so. Maybe it was the right choice. At least his daughter will grow up with a father.”

“And you’re alone.”

“Not entirely. I have God, friends, family. I’m not married, but I do have a full life.”

“I didn’t mean to imply—”

She shrugged. “I know, it’s okay.” She touched his arm, her cool fingers lingering on his wrist for a moment. “You’re a good guy, Cory. I can tell.”

He felt a glow of warmth at her words. He found his gaze traveling her face. Her fair complexion betrayed every passing emotion, her auburn lashes entranced him. How her husband could ever have stopped looking at her, he had no idea.

“What about you?” Eloise glanced up and he looked quickly away, not wanting to be caught staring. “What do you do on your downtime?”

“What downtime?” he joked, then grew more serious. “It’s all work and no play, but I love all of it. I guess the best part is riding. Have you ridden a horse before?”

She shook her head. “I never have. Shocking for a Montana girl, I know.”

“You should try it.” Cory smiled. “There’s no feeling like galloping across a field—pure freedom.”

“One day,” she agreed. “I need someone to teach me.”

“I could volunteer. You’d have ample opportunity if you came out to my ranch.”

“That’s up to my patient at the moment.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“It would be very fun, though. I could take some time to paint.” She paused in her stride and looked up into his face. “I like the lines around your eyes.”

“Oh?”

“Here.” She raised her hand as if to touch him, then pulled back before making contact. “The lines—they speak of laughter, but also worry. And when the sun is at this angle—” She stopped, laughed uncomfortably. “I’m sorry.”

“You were thinking about painting me, weren’t you?”

“Just your eyes. Eyes really are the window to the soul.”

They stopped as they reached another street. Beyond the intersection, houses lined the road. A little girl crouched over a driveway with a piece of chalk, and a boy sat in the grass, watching her with a bored look on his face. Somewhere in the distance, the tinkle of an ice cream truck surfed the breeze, and both children perked up immediately, then dashed toward the house, shouting for money.

“Should we head back?” Cory asked.

She nodded. “Sure.”

They turned around, their pace relaxed. They moved over as a young couple walked past them down the sidewalk, hands in each other’s back pockets. What was it about high school students? They seemed younger with each passing year.

“You probably know my dad better than anyone right now. I was hoping you might be able to give me some insight,” Cory said.

“Maybe in time spent with him,” she agreed. “But you’ll know him better in other ways—the things you share.”

“We don’t share much,” he muttered. They looked nothing alike physically—not to his eye anyway. They obviously felt differently about his mother, and their outlooks on life couldn’t be more opposed. If his father hadn’t confirmed that Cory was indeed his son, he might have questioned the fact.

“You share more than you think,” she replied. “You’re father and son. You share DNA.”

“There are a lot of things I’d rather not share with him. No offense, but he’s not exactly a role model to emulate.”

Eloise didn’t answer, but he could see in her expression that she understood. They quickly approached his truck in front of the produce store, and he felt a drop of disappointment that he had no excuse to spend more time with her. He slowed his pace.

“Do you want a ride somewhere?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, thanks. I like the exercise.”

He took the two bags of fruit from the back of his truck and handed them to her. She looked questioningly at the extra bag.

“Maybe you could give it to my dad. I thought—” He stopped, unwilling to articulate his frustration.

She held out her hand and he took it in a gentle handshake.

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate it. You really are a good guy, Cory Stone.”

“I’ll see you,” he said, then released her slender hand.

She smiled, her green eyes sparkling. “I’ll give you a call when he gives me an answer.”

As Eloise walked away, the bags of fruit swinging at her side and her slim, beaded sandals slapping cheerfully against the sidewalk, one thought remained uppermost in Cory’s mind: as gorgeous as she was, as sweet, as interesting...

Nothing could ever develop between them. She was a tempting city girl, but a city girl nonetheless. It took a special kind of woman to fit into a ranch, and no amount of wishful thinking could change it.

* * *

Mr. Bessler sank back onto his bed. His eyes fluttered shut, then open again and he licked his dry lips. The late-afternoon sunlight glowed from behind the closed curtains, one ray of light slipping past the thick fabric and illuminating the dance of dust motes.

“How are you feeling?” Eloise asked as she counted his pills into a little paper cup.

“I need those.”

“How is the pain, on a scale of one to ten?”

“Forty-two,” he rasped. “I think I’m getting addicted to those pills—not that it matters at this point.”

“They help with the pain, and that’s what matters most.”

Mr. Bessler propped himself up on an elbow to take the pills with a cup of water, then sank back onto his pillow.

“Mr. Bessler, you haven’t told me yet if you want to go to your son’s ranch.”

“The doctor will never agree to it,” he muttered.

“Actually, I talked to him and he said that now is the time to do these things.”

“Forget it. I don’t want to.”

“Mr. Bessler, if that’s your decision, then I’ll support you, but I have to point something out.”

He raised an eyebrow quizzically.

“If you push away Cory, who will you have left?”

“You, Red,” he replied, then sighed. “That’s sad, isn’t it?”

“I’m great company, Mr. Bessler,” she said with a wry smile. “But I’m not family.”

He nodded, his eyelids drooping as the medication began to take effect. He lay silently for a couple of minutes while Eloise busied herself with tidying the small bedroom. His wife had died before him. Eloise’s husband hadn’t died, but his absence left a gaping hole in her life. She’d done her best to fill that gap, but she felt it. Finding someone to care about wasn’t the hardest part. Trusting again after betrayal—that was the challenge, and she suspected that she and her patient had more in common than she liked to admit.

Eloise paused at Mr. Bessler’s side and pressed a hand against his forehead.

“How is the pain now?” she asked. “On a scale of one to ten.”

“Three.”

“Much better.” She adjusted a light blanket over his shoulders. “You should be able to rest now.”

Eloise closed the curtains past that last ray of sunlight, dimming the room. The old man looked smaller in his bed, so frail and pale against the white sheets and blanket. Outside, children’s laughter and chatter mingled with the roll of skateboard wheels. When Eloise first began working with Mr. Bessler, he’d complain about the noisy children, but he no longer mentioned them. Perhaps he’d learned to enjoy their youthful enthusiasm.

“Do you need anything else, sir?” she asked quietly.

“No...” His voice was thin and soft. From the other room, the phone rang.

Eloise looked back at her patient to find his eyes shut. She adjusted the fan so that it would reach Mr. Bessler, then slipped out the door. Eloise looked at her watch and headed toward the living room. They didn’t get phone calls often. She picked it up on the fourth ring.

“Hello, Mr. Bessler’s residence. This is Eloise, how may I help you?”

“Is this Robert Bessler’s house?” a female voice asked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I thought he was a widower. Do I have the wrong number?”

“I’m his nurse.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” The woman laughed uncomfortably. “Is he there?”

“He’s resting right now. Could I take a message?”

“This is Melissa Wright. I’m his cousin’s daughter. We heard he wasn’t doing too well.”

“Who did you hear from?” she asked cautiously.

“The pastor at his church. My father used to live in Haggerston years ago. We were trying to find him to tell him about a family reunion, and the pastor told us about his situation.” The woman laughed nervously. “I wish I’d gotten to know him before—before—” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, maybe I could talk to him later.”

“I’ll let him know that you called.”

From the other room, Mr. Bessler’s voice broke the stillness. “Who is that, Red?”

“Would you hold just a moment?” Eloise said, then brought the phone with her into his bedroom and covered the mouthpiece with one hand.

“This is your cousin’s daughter. She wanted to say hello. Are you up for it?”

Mr. Bessler gestured for phone and she handed it over.

“Hello?” he said.

Eloise left the room to give her patient some privacy, but she could still hear his one-word responses. The quiet was truncated by grunts and “uh-huhs” coming from the other room. After a few minutes, he heaved a sigh.

“No— Melissa, was it? No. I’ve already written a will and decided where my estate will go.”

Eloise cringed and covered her eyes with one hand.

“I understand completely,” Mr. Bessler went on. “But I’m not interested in funding your education. Goodbye.”

The phone beeped as he hung up the handset. For a long moment, no sound emerged from the room, but after a couple of minutes, Mr. Bessler’s voice wavered as he called, “Red?”

Eloise pushed open the bedroom door. Mr. Bessler lay on his bed in the dim bedroom, the phone atop his chest. “Yes, sir?”

“That was a young woman named Melissa.”

“Yes, she mentioned that.” Eloise attempted to sound as impartial as possible.

“She was very thoughtful,” he went on quietly. “She heard I was dying and had no children, and she very kindly offered to let me pay her school bills.”

Eloise grimaced. “That’s horrible.”

“She’ll probably make an excellent lawyer.”

“I beg to differ,” Eloise muttered.

“Anyhow, I told her I wasn’t interested.” Mr. Bessler breathed deeply through his nose. “I don’t want to take any more calls from her, if you don’t mind.”

“Not a problem,” she replied. “I’m sorry about that, sir. Some people are just heartless.”

He waved it off. “It’s part of the package, I’m afraid.”

“What package?” Eloise asked.

“Someone has to get my money, and everyone thinks they deserve it.”

Eloise remained silent, pity welling up inside her.

“The ironic thing is,” the old man said softly, “There isn’t much left.” He laughed hoarsely.

“There might be charities willing to help pay my wages—”

“Never mind that.” Mr. Bessler shook his head. “I’ll pay you. But I won’t let some cousin’s daughter try to wring money out of my estate.”

Tears misted Eloise’s vision, and she blinked them back. Facing death was hard enough surrounded by family and friends. She couldn’t imagine having to think about her own mortality without anyone close to her. It seemed like the time to reach out to people, but Mr. Bessler refused.

“I’m all right, Red,” he said, as if reading her mind. “Don’t you waste those tears on me.” His eyes drooped again. “I’ve got Ruth up there watching over me, and the Lord hasn’t left me alone yet.”

“And you have me, Mr. Bessler,” she reminded him.

“Maybe it’s time you called me Robert,” he said. “It’s less formal, and you’re probably the best friend I’ve got right now, Red.”

She smiled. “Thanks. You also have a son who doesn’t want anything from your estate,” Eloise pointed out.

“You’re right.” Mr. Bessler sighed, his eyes shut. “He doesn’t need it.”

His breath grew even and deep, and Eloise turned to tiptoe out of the room when his voice stopped her. “Maybe I’ll go see my son’s ranch, after all.”

Hope rose in Eloise's breast. "That would be nice, Robert."

The old man opened one eye. "I didn't say I'd be nice, just that I'd go."

Eloise smothered a grin. She was happy that the old man would have a chance to see his son, and if she was utterly truthful, she was looking forward to seeing Cory, too. He'd been more than she'd expected, somehow—gentler, more complicated, more wounded. Even now she found herself wondering about the big rancher, how he was handling all of this. Mr. Bessler shifted, seeking a more comfortable position.

"I'll let him know," she said.

"Now leave me alone," he grunted. "I want to sleep."

Chapter Three

The next morning, the house vibrated with rare excitement. Robert sat by the window, pretending not to watch for Cory's truck. He scowled at Eloise as she rechecked his oxygen tanks, but when she turned away, she'd catch the scowl fading out of the corner of her eye.

Eloise felt cheerful and upbeat about this trip. It would be good to get away from the musty little house—a holiday from the ordinary. She'd never seen a ranch before, except for what she could glean from movies, and the prospect was both exciting and mildly daunting. She had packed some painting supplies so that she could make the most of her time there.

"I'm bringing your favorite shirts—the soft ones," she told the old man as she tucked the last of the clothing into a suitcase. "I'm also packing your winter robe, just in case it gets chilly."

She chatted away to her patient, getting little response, but each time she looked over at him, she'd catch the anticipation in his eyes, quickly veiled for her benefit. When Cory's truck rumbled to a stop outside, Robert turned away from the window.

"Is he here?" Eloise asked.

"Looks like."

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"It's only a couple of hours away. You're acting like we're leaving for a month."

"I only want to be prepared." She straightened. "It'll be fun, won't it?"

He didn't answer. Instead he attempted to wheel himself toward the bookshelf.

"Can I help you with something, Robert?"

He waved her off. "I have to put something in the suitcase."

From the bookshelf, Mr. Bessler took the ornate urn that held his wife's ashes, and with some effort, he tucked it into the open bag. Eloise didn't attempt to help him. When it came to Ruth, Mr. Bessler didn't like interference.

A knock on the door drew her attention and Eloise went to open it. Cory stood on the doorstep. He pulled his hat from his head, his warm gaze meeting hers, and gave her a nod.

"Morning, ma'am."

She chuckled at his formal manners, a novelty she didn't come across often in Billings. She instantly liked it. "Come on in."

Behind her, she could hear her patient struggling to clear his throat.

"Hi, Mr. Bessler." Cory lifted his hat slightly, then dropped it back on his head and bent to pick up their bags. "Can I take these out?"

Eloise nodded and Cory's boots reverberated on the wooden floor as he headed out, his arms flexed under the weight of the luggage. She caught herself watching his muscular form as he strode back out to the truck. He was strong in a way she didn't often see. This wasn't muscle tone from working out at a gym—this was strength from hard, manual labor, and it looked different somehow, more natural. She tore her gaze away, her cheeks heating in embarrassment. Robert didn't seem to notice, much to her relief.

It didn't take long for their items to be stashed in the back of the pickup, and Eloise wheeled Robert out the side door and down the ramp. They settled the old man in the backseat of the four-

door truck, his oxygen beside him. Cory then gave Eloise a hand up into the front seat before heading around to the driver's side.

"Are you comfortable, Robert?" Eloise asked.

"It'll do."

Cory hopped up into the driver's seat, the scent of his aftershave wafting through the cab. She knew he was a tall man, but proximity to him made him seem larger still. His broad hands slid over the steering wheel as he eased away from the curb, and he gave her a smile.

"I guess we'll all get to know each other a little bit," Cory said as he pulled out of the drive and into the street. "I think you'll like it out there in Blaine County, sir."

"You might as well call me Robert, too," the old man sighed. "All these formal manners are agonizing."

"Thanks. Have you always lived in town?" Cory tried again.

"All my life."

"So you must know a lot of people."

"I know them. I don't like them, but I know them."

Cory laughed. "You're direct, I'll give you that."

Mr. Bessler heaved a dry laugh.

"You said you were an accountant," Cory tried again.

"Sure was."

"You must like working with numbers then."

"I liked a steady paycheck. A married man has to provide."

"So you didn't like your job?"

"It was okay. I didn't hate it. Can't say I was passionate about taxes or anything, though."

"So what did you like?" Cory glanced into the rearview mirror. "There must have been something."

"I had a horse," the old man said quietly. "I liked the horse."

They fell into silence, and Eloise settled comfortably into the seat. They were talking, and she felt gratified. Maybe it wasn't her business, but she was glad to see the old man connecting with his son somehow.

"What kind of horse did you have?" Cory asked.

"Look, no offense, but I'm tired. Talk to her for a bit."

Cory and Eloise exchanged a look and Eloise smothered a smile. She knew her patient well enough to fully expect his bad humor, but she suspected his son wouldn't find his cantankerous nature quite so charming.

"You seem in a hurry to get back," Eloise commented.

He nodded. "Like I said before, calving is a busy time."

"What happens?"

He eyed her uncertainly. "I get the feeling that you aren't much of a country girl."

Eloise shrugged. "I grew up in Billings and moved out here for this position with your father. This is about as rural as I'm used to."

"I appreciate you coming along. You're getting me out of a bind."

"What sorts of injuries should I expect?"

"Sprains, dislocations, cuts and lacerations. Nothing we want to waste time on a hospital visit to get treated. I've got fifty-four ranch hands doing everything from cattle wrangling to maintenance and upkeep around the place."

Soft snoring rumbled from the backseat, and Eloise turned to find Robert sound asleep, his bird-like chest rising and falling.

The fields, fenced by rusty barbed wire, slipped past the window. The highway shot straight through an expanse of fields, the vast landscape dwarfed only by the sky. Huge, boiling cumulus clouds rolled overhead, their shadows slipping silently over the rolling land.

“You said you have a partner at the ranch,” she said, changing the subject.

“Zack.” Cory nodded. “He’s a good friend. When my grandfather passed away, he left the ranch to me and two other cousins. I bought them out, and Zack and his wife, Nora, joined me in running the place. They’re my management team. He’s got a stake in it, of course, but the ranch is mine.” He paused for a moment. “Nora is going to be overjoyed to see you.”

“Because I’m a woman?”

Cory laughed, the sound deep and full. “No, because you’re single and of marriageable age. She’ll try to set us up, you can count on that.”

Eloise felt heat in her cheeks once more. Cory’s gaze lingered on her for a moment before he put his attention back on the road.

“Just don’t take it personally,” he said, “and we should escape unscathed.”

Eloise had to admit that being set up with a handsome cowboy like Cory wasn’t exactly a hardship. She stole a glance in his direction. He tapped a rhythm on the top of the steering wheel, his expression relaxed.

“And what’s kept you single all these years?” Eloise asked.

Cory raised his eyebrows. He took a deep breath. “I haven’t been single this whole time. I was engaged once.”

Eloise eyed him curiously. She’d assumed he was the type who didn’t want to be tied down. She’d come across that kind one too many times in her life, and she found herself pleasantly surprised that Cory wasn’t one of that motley crew.

“What happened?”

“It didn’t work out.”

“Why not?” Eloise knew she was pressing, but he knew the worst about her relationship, so it only seemed fair.

“She left me at the altar.”

“Ouch.” Eloise winced. “Did she explain at all?”

“She left a letter back at the house. She said she couldn’t live the ranch life after all. She wanted to see what the city had to offer her, and I wasn’t that flexible. We wanted different things, it turned out.”

Eloise nodded. She could understand that well enough. Sometimes when a couple both wanted the same thing—like a baby—and it didn’t happen, the results could be equally disastrous.

Cory shrugged. “It’s not that easy to handle a ranching life. My fiancée grew up on a farm, so she was no stranger to hard work.”

“I guess she was no stranger to bad timing, either,” Eloise muttered.

Cory laughed. “It was better that she did it before the wedding, much as that hurt.”

“So what happened to her?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I haven’t heard from her since.”

“When was that?”

“About five years ago.”

They drove in silence for some time, the flat expanse slipping past as the miles clicked by on the odometer.

“I guess we all have our painful pasts,” Eloise said quietly.

The window into Cory’s past had closed. Eloise watched him surreptitiously. His dark gaze moved over the landscape, his jaw tense.

Is he thinking about the woman who left him?

She wouldn't blame him. When she was a teenager, she could eventually heal from a broken heart and move on with optimism for the future, but wedding vows had greater weight, and they took more with them when they tore free. Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said that a married couple became one flesh. They didn't separate without a lot of pain and some deep scars.

In the backseat, her patient shifted, then shifted again.

"Robert, are you all right?" Eloise asked, turning.

Mr. Bessler's eyes fluttered open. "A little sore. I'm okay."

"Scale of one to ten?"

"Fourteen."

"Cory, could we stop at the next rest area?" she asked. "It might help."

He nodded. "For sure. There's a diner coming up in about five minutes."

"Will that work?" Eloise asked.

Mr. Bessler nodded, his lips pale. "Yes. Thank you."

As Eloise took his pills out of her bag and cracked open a bottle of water, she hoped that this trip wouldn't be too much for the old man. As much as he could benefit from the new scenery, change of any kind was exhausting, especially for a terminal patient.

Cory's brow furrowed and he pressed a little more heavily on the gas pedal.

He cares.

That little fact alone eased some of her worry.

* * *

After a stop at the diner for lunch, they drove on for another hour. The truck sped over a gravel country road, dust billowing up behind them. Eloise settled back in the seat, listening to the upbeat jangle of a country tune. Cattle grazed on the swell of a hill, heads down, tails swishing. Over the foothills in the distance, a rainstorm left a gray, foggy smudge, but the sun shone brilliantly overhead where they drove.

"This is a beautiful area," Eloise said.

"This is mine." There was something in the rumble of his voice that drew her attention.

"Really?" She sat up straighter, her gaze moving over the field of green wheat out her window. "All of it?"

"Out your window is land that I lease out for crops. Out my side—" Cory jutted a thumb in the other direction "—is grazing land for my cattle. Beyond Milk River are some hunting grounds."

"Gorgeous," she breathed.

His tone was light as he said, "I might be a little biased, but I think this is the most gorgeous land in the country. There is something about the soil that keeps bringing me back home."

"You really love living out here."

"It's more than loving a location," Cory replied. "It's this ranch. Sometimes a place just becomes a part of you when you aren't looking."

Eloise didn't know how to answer, so she stayed quiet. She could sense the satisfaction in his voice when he talked about his land, his tone almost reverent. She was a city girl through and through, but cities changed constantly. New buildings went up, old buildings came down. While Billings held her memories from girlhood up to womanhood, it didn't inspire the same deep attachment that Cory seemed to feel.

The last few miles slipped by, and Cory slowed as they approached a log arch with a hanging sign that read Stone Ranch. They turned in and followed a meandering drive that led up to a sheltering copse, leaves fluttering in the constant prairie breeze. Beyond the leafy blind sprawled the house, a barn and a paddock. The house was a log ranch style, a long porch sweeping along the front with a couple of rocking chairs sitting empty. The gray barn across the way was more modern, and the paddock where several glossy horses munched hay stretched out in front of the barn. The scene

reminded Eloise of pastoral paintings, all serenity in the golden afternoon sunlight. Except for that modern barn—what was it about modernity that ruined a perfectly pastoral scene?

“Zack and Nora live in the manager’s house down that way,” Cory said, then chuckled. “Never mind. There they are.”

A man and woman emerged from the gray horse barn, both in jeans with cowboy hats pushed back on their heads. Nora wore a T-shirt with a band logo emblazoned across the front, her brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. Zack smacked a pair of leather work gloves against his thigh, a puff of dust exploding from the material. When they saw the truck, Nora raised her hand in a wave.

“Welcome back, stranger,” Zack said with a grin as Cory got out of the truck.

Nora came up to Eloise’s door and gave her a friendly smile and introduced herself. “You must be Eloise.”

“Yes, that’s me,” she replied, returning the woman’s infectious smile. “You certainly live in a lovely area.”

“It’s definitely God’s country,” Nora said. “Thanks for coming to help out. No injuries this morning, thankfully, but it’s only a matter of time with the calving.”

“Can I give you a hand?” Cory asked, poking his head back into the open window of the vehicle.

“Oh, we can handle it,” Nora replied. “Zack needs to show you a weakening spot in the barn roof. I’ll help Eloise get Mr. Bessler settled.”

Cory raised his eyebrows at Eloise and she nodded, attempting to look more self-assured than she felt at the moment. “Go. You’re needed. We’ll be fine.”

Cory grinned. “I’ll be back soon.”

As the men walked in the direction of the barn, Eloise turned to her patient.

“This is Robert Bessler.”

Mr. Bessler smiled wanly in Nora’s direction. “Pleasure.”

“How are you feeling?” Eloise asked quietly. “How is the pain since I gave you your pills at the diner?”

“Six.”

“Do you want more meds now, or after we get inside?”

“Let’s get inside.” He covered his mouth with the oxygen mask and took a deep breath. “And get me out of this truck. I’m nauseated.”

Eloise grinned at his comforting bad humor and the two women worked together to get the old man into his wheelchair, and then pushed it toward the main house. Nora walked ahead and dropped a ramp over the stairs just before they reached them.

“This is handy,” Eloise commented.

“We’ve been wheelchair accessible ever since Grandpa got sick. Come on in. I’ve got some sandwiches in the kitchen if you’re hungry.”

Mr. Bessler muttered something.

“What’s that, handsome?” Nora asked, holding the door for them as they came into the cool foyer.

“I haven’t been called that in at least a decade,” he replied.

“I don’t believe it.” Nora chuckled. “Well, what can I feed you?”

Mr. Bessler shook his head. “Not hungry. She made me eat earlier.”

“A glass of iced tea?”

The old man shrugged.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” A few minutes later, after Mr. Bessler had taken his medication, they sat around a pine table, a large pitcher of iced tea between them. Nora sank into the chair opposite.

“So...” Nora fixed Eloise with a cheerful smile. “Are you single?”

Eloise laughed. “Cory warned me about you.”

“Did he, now? Sorry. I don’t imagine you’re a country girl, are you?”

Eloise shook her head. "I'm afraid not. I was born and raised in Billings and came out to Haggerston to work as a palliative care nurse."

Nora's eyebrows went up, then she glanced toward Mr. Bessler.

"Yes, I'm dying," the old man grunted. "You're allowed to talk about it."

"Well, you never know. You might find out you love all this space."

"It would be hard not to," she admitted, glancing out the window.

"Do you ride horses?" Nora asked.

"No." Eloise shook her head. "Cory mentioned teaching me how, but—"

"Take him up on that." Nora shot her a grin. "He's an excellent teacher, and there are women who would give their eye teeth for an offer like that from Cory Stone."

There was something in the other woman's enthusiasm that hinted at more than a simple riding lesson, and Eloise sipped her iced tea to avoid answering. It was flattering to be seen as a romantic option for the rugged cowboy, but Eloise wasn't exactly "on the market" again after her divorce.

The side door banged and the sound of men's voices mingled with the clomp of boots in the mudroom where the men took off their work apparel before coming into the kitchen.

"There they are." Nora stood up and headed back to the kitchen counter. "Do you two want a sandwich?" she called.

Eloise turned to see Cory amble into the kitchen.

"Robert, can I get you something else?" Cory asked.

His father shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

Cory exchanged a look with Eloise and she shook her head ever so slightly. Accepting a sandwich from Nora, Cory slipped into the chair next to Eloise.

Eloise cast about for a subject of conversation. "This is an interesting old house."

"My grandfather built it. I did some renovations when I took the place over, though."

Eloise's gaze roamed over the walnut floors, glowing from a recent polish. A rough-hewn stone fireplace dominated one side of the sitting room, the opening wide and deep, and couches surrounded it. The couches looked worn, as if they'd been used for decades, but the wear and tear only added to the charm, making her wonder about the family members who made their memories surrounding that hearth. The kitchen was large and spacious, dark cabinets combining with the walnut floors to bring a cozy feel without sacrificing space.

"A home says a lot about a person," Eloise said. "So do his friends."

"Oh no," Cory groaned. "What did she say?"

Eloise grinned. "Not too much. She's nice, though. I like her."

A smile twitched at one corner of his lips, and she chuckled.

"You seem to be the most eligible bachelor in Blaine County," Eloise offered.

"To hear Nora tell it."

"And if you tell it?"

"I don't know." He looked down at his hands. "I don't want to waste a woman's time."

Eloise knew that feeling all too well. Even though she'd known Cory only briefly, she suspected they'd understand each other perfectly. Flirting and dating might bring some excitement to her life, but she wasn't looking for compliments and a dinner out. She was past the age of playing games.

"Or your own time," she added.

"I suppose. I don't want to get involved with someone just to break up later. It's not worth the heartache."

She nodded. "I feel the same way."

"Is my dad doing okay?" he asked, lowering his voice.

The old man slumped in his chair, his eyelids drooping. Eloise put her hand over her patient's cool fingers. "Are you all right, Robert?" she asked quietly.

"Getting tired," he murmured.

“And the pain?”

“Two.”

“Perfect.” Eloise looked up at Nora. “Would you mind showing us Mr. Bessler’s bedroom? He could use a rest.”

“Oh, for sure.” Nora gave her husband’s hand a squeeze before heading toward the kitchen doorway. “Come right this way. I got your bedrooms ready this morning. I have Mr. Bessler in the front room—he can see the horses graze right out his window.”

“Thanks for all of this, Cory,” Eloise said as she rose from the table.

“It’s nothing.” His warm eyes met hers.

As Eloise moved around the table, she sensed his gaze following her. She felt off-kilter somehow. Staying at an attractive man’s house was definitely outside her comfort zone.

The men’s tones dropped as Eloise rolled Mr. Bessler from the room, and Nora chatted about the choices of bedrooms as she led the way down the hallway. She stopped in front of a door.

“I’ll just let you settle in, handsome. You’re next door, Eloise. Cory sleeps down the other hallway, so you’ll have some privacy.”

“Thank you,” Eloise said. “It’s really nice to meet you, Nora.”

“Likewise.” Nora looked back in the direction of the kitchen. “Come on back when you’re ready.”

Eloise rolled Mr. Bessler into his bedroom and began turning down his bed. The old man looked pale, the exertion of the trip seeming to have taken a toll.

“It’s a pretty room,” Eloise commented. She opened a door and peeked inside a small washroom. She shut the washroom door and surveyed the bedroom. The head of a sturdy wooden bed was in the center of one wall, a tall mahogany wardrobe looming to the side. It reminded her of the Narnia novels—the wardrobe that held the doorway to a hidden world. A wooden chair sat by the window, a folded patchwork quilt tossed over one arm. The floorboards creaked under them comfortingly, and Eloise pushed her patient closer to the window to give him the benefit of the view. The window opened up over the winding road that separated them from the horse paddock, and she paused to admire the animals. She knew next to nothing about horses, but she recognized that they were well groomed and cared for.

“You have your own private bath,” Eloise said, by way of making conversation.

“That’s nice.”

“Nora seems friendly, doesn’t she?”

Mr. Bessler didn’t look inclined to cheer up. He regarded her with somber eyes. Eloise let the smile slip from her face.

“Red?” His voice wavered.

“Yes?” She squatted down next to his chair.

“I need your help with something.”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“I promised Ruth I’d scatter her ashes. I never did.”

“You wanted to keep her close. That’s perfectly understandable.”

“But I promised her.” A pained look came to his lined face. “It’s one more vow I’ve broken, and I don’t like that.”

Eloise nodded. “I get that. This would be a pretty place to do it.”

“Lay my wife to rest on my illegitimate son’s land?” He stared at her incredulously.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

“It needs to be off this land. I can’t die without doing the one thing she asked of me.”

Eloise nodded. “I’ll help you with that, but right now you need to rest.”

Mr. Bessler let out a soft grunt as she helped him to his feet. He shuffled the few steps to the bed and sank into it with a deep sigh.

“Comfortable?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Good.” She moved his wheelchair to a convenient spot out of the way. “Robert, this trip is for you and your relationship with your son. I don’t want you to forget that.”

“That’s baloney.” A smile twitched at his thin lips.

“You need to tell me if there is anything I can do to help you. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Oh, Red.” Tenderness entered the old man’s voice. “Young people are so naive. But life is shorter than you’d think. Don’t waste time.”

Eloise stopped short, surprised at this sudden gentleness from her short-tempered patient.

“Do you think I’m wasting time?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said bluntly.

“What should I be doing differently?” she asked as she pulled the blankets over her patient.

“Living.”

“I suppose we all do that in our own ways,” she replied.

“No, we all stall and avoid getting close to people in our own ways,” he replied drowsily. “Take a few chances, Red. When you get to my age, you don’t want any regrets.”

The old man shut his eyes and exhaled a slow breath. Eloise stood silently, her patient’s medication sheet in her hands. Warm sunlight pooled on the floor next to the bed, and outside the window, a rabbit ventured onto the lawn, nose twitching. Was Eloise stalling? Was she avoiding?

The rabbit scampered away. With a sigh, she turned back toward the door.

Chapter Four

Cory hung up his cell phone with a sigh. A ranch hand had cut himself, and he’d need some medical attention.

“What happened?” Zack asked from where he sat at the table, putting together the work schedule for the next month.

“Barbed wire.”

Zack winced. “At least we’ve got a medic now.”

Cory nodded. “Yeah, thankfully. Can you stay here with my father while we’re gone?”

“Sure.” Zack shrugged. “What do I need to do?”

“We’ll ask Eloise, but if he’s already in bed, I doubt there will be too much.”

Though Cory didn’t want to disturb Eloise while she was working with his dad, he couldn’t just leave a man to lose blood, either. So he headed down the hallway and knocked on his father’s bedroom door.

“Yes?” Eloise opened it.

“We’ve got an injury. Can you come?”

“Give me two minutes. I just have to make sure your father is comfortable. Can someone keep an eye on him?”

“Zack says he can stick around. He wants to know if there is anything he needs to do.”

“Just listen in case he asks for something.” She flashed him a smile.

“Okay.” He jutted his chin in the direction of the kitchen. “I’ll be out there when you’re ready.”

Cory went back to the kitchen and leaned against the counter, his gaze overlooking the horse pasture. Zack hunched over the schedule, an eraser in one hand and a pencil in the other, deep in concentration.

This land—this soil—had seeped into Cory over the years. At first, it had been the summer weeks he spent with his grandfather while his mother worked in Billings in a hotel laundry room. She couldn’t afford child care to watch him during school summer vacation, so she sent him to be on the ranch with her parents. This was the place he’d learned about life.

He had also learned important lessons with his mother, but times were harder in Billings. They couldn’t waste money, and they carefully measured out the milk, never wasting a drop. He saw his

mother exhausted from a long day at work, and he listened to those late-night conversations when she'd call her parents on the ranch and refuse to take any money.

"No, no, we're fine. I'm doing some overtime. Thanks for inviting Cory to come this summer. I'm going to miss him, though."

He'd learned thriftiness and self-reliance at home with his mother in their one-bedroom apartment, and on the ranch, he learned responsibility and hard work as he got up with the sun to start chores. He learned about delayed gratification when he raised a coop full of chicks to maturity before he started gathering eggs. He learned about the birds and the bees when he witnessed enough calves being born to spark the right questions.

His grandfather had been the male presence in his life, and those early-morning rides out to the herd when the sun eased over the horizon, or those evenings when they stood together in the mudroom, washing their hands with a big bar of soap before going in for supper, were moments that formed him.

His mother would visibly relax when she drove them up that winding drive, the worry lines in her face softening, and she'd heave a sigh of relief.

"You'll have fun this summer," she'd say. "And I'll be back in two weeks to spend a couple of days with you. You'll behave yourself, right? You do as you're told and listen to Grandma and Grandpa."

The lectures hadn't been necessary, of course. Cory wouldn't do anything to jeopardize his time on the ranch. It was the one place on earth where he could drink all the milk he wanted and roam as far as his legs would take him. Looking out over the pasture, watching the horses graze always reminded him of those summer weeks when his grandfather shouldered the pressures, and Cory got to dream about owning his own horse one day.

Who knew I'd have the ranch?

He still felt a familiar surge of gratitude at that thought. This ranch meant more to him than anything else.

A rustling sound behind him pulled him out of his memories and he turned to see Eloise in the doorway of the kitchen. She hesitated, green eyes meeting his. She pulled her curls away from her face, and her lips parted ever so slightly, and he could feel all of his orderly thoughts slipping away. What was it about this woman that addled his brain like that? He cleared his throat.

"You ready to head out?" Cory asked. "It's a pretty deep cut, apparently."

"Sure. Let me grab my supplies—"

"I've got a fully stocked kit in the truck." Cory pulled his thoughts away from dangerous territory and surveyed her attire. Her jeans were all right, but the delicate teal blouse didn't look as if it would survive long out here. Dare he say anything? There was an injured ranch hand waiting.

"Then let's go." She turned to Zack. "Thanks for checking on Mr. Bessler for me. He's almost sleeping now. His painkillers have taken effect."

"No problem," Zack said with a wave. "It's good to have you here."

She turned and followed Cory to the door, then out to the truck. He pulled open her door, then headed around to the driver's side. When he hopped up into his seat and the truck rumbled to life, Eloise eyed him tentatively. "Your father wants to scatter his wife's ashes one of these days soon."

"Okay." He put the truck into Reverse and eased out of the drive, then pushed it into Drive and headed down the gravel road. "Here?" he clarified. "Does he want me to do anything?"

It felt awkward to be suddenly so intimately aware of his father's dying wishes. Moving from boyhood fantasies of a superhero of a father to the startling reality of the dying old man was a shock to the system, and he felt mildly embarrassed at the mention of Ruth. He'd seen the pictures on the wall in the Bessler house, but so far, Ruth Bessler was little more than a shadow—a name his father mentioned with a look of annoyance shot in Cory's direction. At least right now they were a father and son in the same house, but as soon as Ruth came up, it was as if miles suddenly slid between them.

“I said I’d help him with it, so you don’t need to worry.” Eloise cleared her throat. “He wants to do it off your property.”

Cory couldn’t say he was surprised. His father jealously protected Ruth’s memory, and he didn’t imagine that the old man would want to lay her to rest on his illegitimate son’s land.

“That’s understandable,” he said. He scanned the passing horse barn out of habit, his eyes skipping over each gate to check that it was locked.

“Why do you put up with him?” Cory’s tone was sharper than he intended and he winced inwardly.

“It’s part of the job.” Eloise frowned. “But then again, he’s not my father, so I don’t have the same expectations you do.”

“I don’t have a lot of expectations. I don’t even know the man.”

“My patients all give me something unique. Your dad is no different.”

“You must see a different side of him, because I can’t get beyond his surliness.”

“He definitely can be a grump. But when he talks about Ruth...he really loved her. Still does, I daresay.”

Cory didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure how much a man could love a woman while cheating on her, and anger simmered inside him again. For all of Robert’s adoration for Ruth, he hadn’t been able to love his only son, and that fact still rubbed him a little raw. Eloise turned her gaze out the window and pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Is it far?” she asked.

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