



New
Season
**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Medical & Romance

NYC ANGELS

Janice Lynn

Heiress's Baby
Scandal

Janice Lynn
NYC Angels: Heiress's
Baby Scandal

Аннотация

When gossip headlines announce that reluctant socialite Eleanor Aston is in a 'relationship' with smooth-talking Texan Tyler Donaldson, for one glorious night this fake fling becomes fact, not fiction! Devoted nurse Eleanor knows she's in over her head with neonatal doc Ty – and that's before the paparazzi discover her baby bombshell!

Содержание

NYC Angels:	5
CHAPTER ONE	7
CHAPTER TWO	22
CHAPTER THREE	34
CHAPTER FOUR	52
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	53

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair and a pearl necklace, smiling and holding a newborn baby wrapped in a white cloth. The background is a soft, out-of-focus beige.

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A blue cross-shaped logo with a white ampersand in the center. The vertical bar of the cross features a white heartbeat line.

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NYC Angels: Heiress's Baby Scandal Janice Lynn



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To my editor, Lucy Gilmour. Thanks for all you do!

Dear Reader

Okay, I'll admit it. I'm a sucker for a cowboy. I mean, really, there's just something about a gorgeous man in a cowboy hat that makes my heart go thump-thump-thumpity-thump. Make that man gorgeous, good-hearted and the owner of a sexy Texan drawl and I might just have to turn up the AC. Tyler Donaldson is just such a man. Ty was my first cowboy hero, but I seriously doubt he'll be my last. I had a lot of fun researching his character. Really, I did. Have I mentioned how much I love my job?

Ty and Ellie's story also presented me with another new experience as this was my first continuity series. Working closer with my fellow Medical Romance™ authors was great, and I loved watching as each of our stories developed. What an amazingly talented group!

I hope you enjoy Ty and Ellie's story as much as I enjoyed researching (grin!) and writing their story. Drop me an e-mail at Janice@janicelynn.net to share your thoughts about their romance, cowboys, or just to say hello.

Happy reading!

Janice

CHAPTER ONE

UH-UH. THERE WAS absolutely no way Dr. Eleanor Aston was wearing that itsy-bitsy, teeny-tiny scrap of sparkly spandex her sister had sent for her to wear tonight!

“Take it back,” she ordered Norma, the darling, elderly woman who’d headed up the Aston household for over twenty years and a woman who was more like family than—well, than Eleanor’s biological family.

Looking out of place and uncomfortable in the hospital doctors’ lounge where Eleanor had pulled her to talk in private, Norma shook her head. “Sorry, but I can’t do that. Brooke gave me specific instructions. You are to wear that dress and those shoes to the ribbon-cutting ceremony.”

Right, because she could squeeze her more than generous curves into the dress. Eleanor shuddered just at the mental image.

“I’m giving you specific instructions, too. Take it back, because even if I could squeeze into that ...” She eyed the glitzy red dress and matching stilettos her sister had picked out. “Well, it’s not exactly my style, is it?”

Staring at Eleanor with her almost-black eyes, Norma shrugged her coat-clad shoulders. “Perhaps your sister thinks your style needs an update.”

Norma’s tone implied that Brooke wasn’t the only one who thought that.

Ha. No doubt about it. Media darling Brooke Aston definitely thought her sister's style as ugly duckling in the midst of a family of swans should change. Mostly because Brooke thought Eleanor's usual wardrobe of hospital scrubs to be the bottom of fashion's totem pole.

Eleanor loved her hospital scrubs.

For so many reasons. Never had she felt more proud than when she'd donned a pair after she'd completed her training as a pediatrician specializing in neonatology. Plus, shapeless hospital scrubs hid a lot of body flaws.

"A lot" being the key words. She'd never be a size two like Brooke and she'd quit beating herself up over that years ago.

She eyed the scrap of fancy material again, crinkled her nose and shook her head. "I'm sorry my sister wasted your time, but you can keep the dress because I'm not going to wear it, or those torture devices my sister calls shoes." She glanced at her watch. "Sorry to run, but I've got to get back to the NICU. My patients need me."

Norma winced, but didn't look surprised by Eleanor's answer. "Brooke won't be happy."

Was her baby sister ever happy with anything that didn't involve all the attention being on her? Too bad she'd had an allergic reaction to some new beauty cream that had left her unable to bask in the limelight of Senator Cole Aston's latest publicity project.

At least this time Eleanor agreed with how her father was

spending his money. Actually, she was quite pleased, which was the only reason she'd agreed to take Brooke's place at the ribbon-cutting ceremony this evening. He'd donated an exorbitant amount to build a new neonatal wing for premature babies at the Angel Mendez Children's Hospital where she worked.

She loved being a part of something as wonderful as Angel's, New York's first and finest free children's hospital. Working with her preemies left her with a feeling inside that no other aspect of her life had ever achieved. She felt needed, whole, as if she made a difference. In her patients' families' eyes, she did matter, was the most important person in their tiny baby's world.

Her patients didn't care that she wasn't glamorous or wearing the latest Paris styles. They didn't care if her hair was plain black and always clipped tightly to her scalp in a bun. They didn't care that she never bothered with makeup or taking time to put in her contact lenses so her thick-framed glasses didn't hide her dark brown eyes.

Neither did they care that she'd never be beautiful and svelte like her petite sister, not with her bone structure and too-generous curves that no amount of starving herself seemed to cure. So she just maintained a healthy diet and lifestyle and ignored that the media liked to point out the differences between her and her Hollywood-thin, perfectly coiffed sister.

Pain knotted Eleanor's gut at the recall of some of the comments that the gossip rags had made about those differences over the years.

Her sister might love the limelight, but Eleanor detested it, did everything she could to avoid putting herself in the media's glare. Yet tonight she would be representing her family at a very important event for Angel's. The press would be there in droves.

What had she been thinking?

The sheer impact of what she'd agreed to do hit her, made her hand shake, reminded her that she was being forced to attend a social event. Still, think of all the families the new wing would benefit.

She took a deep breath, praying a full-blown panic attack didn't hit. "Brooke isn't going to be happy anyway, Norma. She's not the one cutting the ribbon this evening."

Having been a constant fixture in their lives and knowing them as well as their own mother did, probably better, a semblance of a smile played on Norma's twitching lips at Eleanor's accurate assessment of her sister.

"Agreed, but you're going to have to return that dress yourself." At Eleanor's frown, she continued, "If I'm going to have one or the other of you upset with me, it's going to be you over your drama-queen sister."

Eleanor took another deep breath and exhaled slowly. Hadn't it been that way her whole life? Brooke always managed to get her way one way or another, whether it was with their parents, the hired help, the media, or the many enamored people who flocked to be close to such "perfection" as the lovely and superfun Brooke Aston.

Eleanor had spent a great portion of her life in the shadows. Fortunately, she liked it there.

She glanced at her watch again. She'd been away from the neonatal unit too long already. "Fine. I'll deal with this later."

Eleanor's heart squeezed as Rochelle Blackwood's tiny fingers wrapped around her pinky finger. So precious.

Even with the tubes and wires attached to the twenty-six-weeks-gestation little girl, nothing was more beautiful or precious to Eleanor than new life.

Not so many years ago, Rochelle wouldn't have had any chance of surviving outside her mother's womb short of a miracle. Thanks to advances in modern medicine, the little girl's odds had greatly increased, although certainly she was high risk. Still, each day she survived raised those odds.

Eleanor intended to give her tiny patient everything in her favor that she could.

"What do you think, Eleanor?" Scarlet Miller, the head neonatal unit nurse, asked from beside the tiny heated incubator. "Is she going to pull through?"

Rochelle had been born with part of her intestines outside her abdomen, with underdeveloped lungs and eyelids that were paper-thin and not yet open. She couldn't eat or breathe on her own. But the little girl had a strong will to live. Eleanor felt the strength of her spirit every time she was near the baby.

"I hope so. She's a fighter, that's for sure."

Rochelle's mother had been sideswiped by a drunk driver and

had suffered multiple crush injuries. Rochelle had been in trouble and the decision had been made to deliver by emergency cesarean section. Sadly, her mother hadn't survived the night.

Eleanor felt a special bond with the baby, perhaps because the five-day-old baby's father was grieving the loss of his wife and had yet to visit the little girl who'd already undergone multiple surgeries and treatments during her short life. The medical staff of the NICU was the only human contact the baby had.

"Agreed," a strong masculine Texan voice drawled from behind her. "I hope you don't mind, but I've been keeping tabs on this little darlin'."

As it always did when Dr. Tyler Donaldson was around, Eleanor's face caught fire. Not literally, of course, but it may as well have for how hot her skin burned anytime the man was near.

Just as it also always did, her tongue refused to do anything other than stick to the roof of her mouth, leaving her unable to answer him and feeling like an awkward teenager with a first crush.

Urgh. How could one sister be such a consummate flirt and known for the many hunks wrapped around her manicured finger and the other sister be a shy, inept mute just because a good-looking man spoke to her? Not even spoke to her about anything personal but about a patient. Yes, she really was pathetic.

Probably taking her silence as disapproval—or who knew what he thought of her since he usually ignored her—Tyler stepped closer to the incubator. "I was on duty the night she made

her entrance into the world. She's such a sweet little darlin', ain't she?"

His Southern accent got to her, just as it did most of Angel's female staff. In a big way. His voice was so inviting, like a fire on a cold winter's night. She just wanted to bask in the warmth of everything about the man. Which was crazy. He was a total player who charmed women right out of their pants. Yet all his exes still adored him. Go figure.

She risked a look at him and immediately wished she hadn't. Just as if she really did stand next to a fire, her face burst into a new wave of flames. If there was a pill to cure blushing she'd be first in line at the pharmacy, because she hated the nervous reaction almost as much as she hated her panic attacks.

"You met her father?" Tyler asked, his warm brown gaze focused on the baby.

Still unable to prise her tongue off the roof of her mouth, Eleanor shook her head.

"Guess he still ain't been by." Tyler sighed, making the sound long and as drawn out as his speech, as if every sound that came from his mouth had to stretch the span of his home state of Texas. "Can't help but feel bad for the guy. Losing his wife that way and afraid that he'll lose this li'l sweetheart, too."

Her tongue still not cooperating, Eleanor nodded.

"I'm glad she got assigned to you, Eleanor. She got lucky and got the best." Without looking up, he brushed his finger gently across where the baby still clung to Eleanor's finger.

Sparks shot up her arm and her breath caught in her throat.

She'd been so engrossed in the man beside her, in his unexpected compliment, she'd completely forgotten she was still touching the baby until his skin made contact with hers.

Wow.

Just wow.

Thinking she had finally prised her tongue loose, she turned to try to say something witty, but just as she opened her mouth, he flashed that half-crooked grin of his. At someone walking up beside them.

Someone else female.

Because he was Dr. Tyler Donaldson and that's what he did best.

With every single female in the NICU except for dumpy, boring, *mute*, too-curvy Eleanor Aston.

Where was the black dress she'd brought with her that morning?

Panic raced through Eleanor as she stared at the contents of her staff locker.

It had been ransacked.

In the place of her gym bag, the black dress that she'd neatly hung that morning and the pair of black flats she'd planned to quickly change into was a note in familiar handwriting.

A note that made smoke billow from her ears.

You're gonna look so hot, sis. You can thank me later. B.

Thank her? Ha. She was going to strangle her sister. How

had Brooke gotten into the doctors' lounge? Gotten into her locked locker? Not that her sister had been there herself. No way would Brooke risk being seen or photographed with her face red, swollen and peeling.

Yet her sister had wiped her out.

Even her purse was gone.

There were three items in the locker other than the note. The red dress and stilettos that her sister had so thoughtfully sent over and a square white box that covered almost the entire bottom of the locker.

Dare she even open the lid to see what lay inside?

She glanced at her watch, knew she was running out of time and snatched the lid off to stare at the items inside.

Underwear. Eleanor wrinkled her nose. Leave it to her sister to know that if you were going to wear an itty-bitty dress you had to have itty-bitty underwear to go with it.

Plus, a red clutch purse that matched her dress and shoes and a too-big, too-flamboyant hair clip meant more for adornment than to actually be useful.

And makeup. Lots of makeup.

Acid gurgling in her stomach, Eleanor shook her head. This was her place of employment, the hospital where she worked.

Okay, she'd jump in the shower and pray that when she was clean, her belongings would be back.

They weren't.

"What's wrong?" Scarlet asked, doing a mad makeover dash

of her own to get changed for the ribbon-cutting.

“My sister has gone too far this time.” Eleanor tightened the towel she had wrapped around her body. “How am I ever going to be taken seriously again if I wear that?”

Scarlet’s gaze ran over the dress then over Eleanor from head to toe. “I’m pretty sure if you wear that there’s going to be a lot of people taking you seriously. Maybe one person in particular.”

Eleanor’s chest tightened. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t give me that. I’ve seen how you look at him.”

“Who?” Had her voice just squeaked?

Scarlet laughed. “Dr. Donaldson.”

“He barely knows I exist.”

Scarlet motioned to the dress. “You wear that and there’s not going to be a man alive who isn’t aware you exist.”

Eleanor crinkled her nose. Brooke she could see putting her into a dress she shouldn’t be in, but she trusted Scarlet. “You really think so?”

Scarlet gave her a *duh* look. “Hurry up and get changed and I’ll help you do your makeup and hair. You have great eyes and hair. We’ll play them up to draw attention to them.”

Great eyes and hair? Right. Had Brooke bribed her friend to say that? Next thing she would be telling her she had a great body.

“Of course, with a chest like yours it’s going to be difficult to keep attention anywhere but on your cleavage.”

That she knew. Which was why she never wore anything revealing or clingy. Her breasts were too big, but they matched

her curvy hips and thighs.

But Scarlet was right. She was running out of time and it wasn't as if she had anything else to wear. Plus, she felt ridiculous talking while wearing only a towel.

She let her gaze go back to the items in her locker. If she was going to look a fool, she might as well go for broke. "Why not?" She smiled at her friend. "We'd better hurry. Thanks to my father for being out of town and Brooke not being able to make it, yours truly is sort of the guest of honor."

"You're going to totally knock the socks off Dr. Donaldson," Scarlet mused as Eleanor stepped into the dress. "It's a perfect fit."

Eleanor blinked, then put her glasses on and stared at herself in the mirror. "Yeah, but where's the rest of the dress?"

She tugged on the material, trying to cover some of her cleavage, but only managed to hike the skirt higher up her thighs.

Dear Lord, if she bent over someone might get a glimpse of those tiny scraps of underwear Brooke had left her no choice but to wear or go commando.

Mortification set in. "I can't go out in public like this."

Scarlet inspected her then nodded. "You're right. Hand 'em over."

"Huh?"

"Your glasses. Give them to me."

One hand protectively holding on to her frames, Eleanor shook her head. "I can't see without them."

Scarlet tsked. “You should get contact lenses. You have gorgeous eyes.”

“I have contacts.” She wore them for sports and exercise, but rarely when she was at the hospital as she was more comfortable behind the shield of her glasses. “But since my sister took my purse, I couldn’t put them in if I wanted to.”

“Not a problem.” Before Eleanor could stop her, Scarlet had plucked her glasses off her face and refused to give them back. “Now, let’s get you to the ribbon-cutting because you’re already five minutes late.”

Eleanor glanced at her arm, realized she wasn’t wearing her watch and frowned. Late? The senator was not going to be happy with his elder daughter.

During the whole walk to the new wing, Eleanor told herself that all the stares she was getting was because she was wearing a fancy red dress in a children’s hospital.

She knew better.

Thank goodness she’d decided to carry her heels because if she’d had to walk in those things over to the new wing, she’d have fallen flat on her face and probably split the seams of her dress in the process.

“Quit fidgeting,” Scarlet ordered from beside her. “You look great.”

She looked a fool—not that she could see how foolish she looked, not without her glasses.

Only this time was much worse than past embarrassments

because she was at the hospital where she worked, surrounded by the people she worked with, people who, until today, had respected her as Dr. Eleanor Aston.

Dr. Tyler Donaldson grinned at the cute little nurse who worked in the obstetrics department and considered the possibilities.

Just as he knew she was sizing him up.

No doubt she'd heard about his reputation.

Everyone at the hospital knew he was a love-'em-and-leave-'em kind of man.

He liked it that way. Truthfully, he was pretty sure most of the women liked it that way, too, although they'd never admit it.

He was a good time waiting to happen, but not a keeper.

However, the blonde was looking at him as if she wouldn't mind keeping him occupied for the night.

"I can't believe Dr. Aston isn't here yet," she chattered, although Ty was more interested in what her eyes were saying. Those eyes were saying *you and me, bub, hot and sweaty between the sheets*.

Although he hated admitting it, lately he'd been getting bored with women.

"I never would have thought she'd be late."

Dr. Aston? No, he wouldn't have pictured her the type to be late either. She seemed much too uptight to be anything other than punctual. Unless something had come up with one of her tiny patients and then Ty could see the dedicated pediatrician

blowing this celebration altogether. He'd be hard-pressed to name a more dedicated doctor.

"It's so difficult to believe she and Brooke Aston are really sisters."

He'd have to live in another country not to know who Brooke Aston was. The media loved her. The image of a blonde bombshell came to mind. Yeah, accepting that the two women came from the same DNA pool was difficult to believe.

"Brooke was supposed to have been here to cut the ribbon, but she caught a virus or something while volunteering at some charity event for sick children," the blonde prattled on. "I hope it's nothing serious."

From the things Ty had seen about the infamous senator's daughter, he had a hard time envisioning her getting close enough to sick kids to have actually caught something from them.

"Maybe one of them was adopted," he suggested to make polite conversation. With the publicity for the new wing, he'd heard about the family connection prior to this evening. As Eleanor didn't make a bleep on his possibility radar, he hadn't paid much attention to the hospital gossip.

But something about her irked him. He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was about her, just that he'd decided to steer clear.

"Oh, my word!"

At her gasp, Ty's attention jerked back from thoughts of a woman who crept into his mind more often than a woman who

didn't make a bleep on his radar should to the OB nurse. Her gaze was fixed beyond him to the hallway leading into the new wing. He turned to see what she was looking at and found his own breath catching in his throat.

It took him only a moment to realize who he was looking at. Even then he had to do a double take before he could convince himself that he wasn't wrong. But once he realized that it was really *her*, his chest tightened, making him gulp for much-needed oxygen.

"I don't believe it," the nurse next to him muttered. Neither did Ty.

He didn't believe he'd totally missed that Dr. Eleanor Aston had been hiding a killer curvy body beneath those baggy scrubs she wore. Wow.

Bleep. Bleep. Bleep.

Hell, what was his possibility radar doing? He was not interested in Eleanor. Not in baggy scrubs or in a body-hugging red dress that ought to be labeled lethal. Not with her gorgeous brown eyes wide and uncertain rather than hidden behind her glasses as she faced the crowd. Not with her glossy black hair flowing loosely down her back rather than tightly pinned to her scalp.

Only he was and maybe he had been all along.

Bleep.

CHAPTER TWO

"I'M SORRY I'M LATE," Eleanor apologized to the hospital CEO, to the hospital medical director, to the NICU director and several other hospital bigwigs whose titles she couldn't quite recall. "I—I worked, and then I had to shower and change." She glanced down at her barely there dress and way-too-exposed body as if that explained everything. "And then my sister had ..."

She stopped, realizing she was rambling, realizing that they all stared at her as if she'd grown a second head and spoke in foreign tongue. Or maybe they were all staring at her too-ample bosom overflowing out of Brooke's idea of a sick joke.

Eleanor couldn't be sure because she couldn't see any of their faces clearly. Which was probably a good thing because she was pretty sure disapproval marred their expressions. They'd never take her or her suggestions for the hospital seriously again.

"Dr. Aston, how do you feel about your father donating the money for the new wing?" A man poked a microphone in her face.

Bile pooled in her stomach. The press. She'd known she'd have to deal with them, both at the ribbon-cutting and at the reception afterward. She wanted to shrivel up and become invisible in the hope they'd go away and not notice her.

Fat chance of that when she was essentially the guest of honor. Not her, really. Just Senator Cole Aston's daughter.

Which technically she was, but if someone had told her she'd been accidentally swapped at birth, she'd have no trouble believing them as she was so different from her socialite mother, power-hungry father and mediadarling sister.

She much preferred being Dr. Eleanor Aston, who was someone she was proud to be most of the time.

She didn't feel proud at the moment.

She felt awkward and uncomfortable and like she might throw up.

She looked at the reporter, wanted to be like Brooke and deliver a smooth, witty line about how proud she was of her father for making such a wonderful contribution to the hospital and community.

But she wasn't Brooke and under the best of circumstances she wasn't witty.

Half-naked and surrounded by people who'd once dubbed her "Jelly Ellie" didn't come close to being the best of circumstances.

Why had the bane of her childhood reared its ugly head now? For years she'd kept that much-used media label out of her head. She wouldn't let it back in, wouldn't let the slurs back into her mind, wouldn't let them degrade the woman she'd become. So she wasn't a skinny Minny and never would be. She was average, of healthy weight and her curves were fairly toned thanks to the hours she spent in the gym each week. The press could get over their craze for too thin.

Thankfully, the hospital CEO grabbed her by her elbow and

whisked her toward the ribbon that partitioned the new wing from the rest of the hospital. A big bright red ribbon that perfectly matched her dress. Had Brooke planned that? Probably. Her sister had an eye for detail.

“We’re already a little behind schedule.” The CEO didn’t actually say that it was her fault but she felt the weight of his implication all the same. He was getting his slam in on Dr. Eleanor Aston being late, but wasn’t going to say anything specific to Eleanor Aston, daughter of Senator Cole Aston. “So we’ll get the show on the road.”

Fine. The sooner they got this started, the sooner they’d finish, the sooner she could go home and try to figure out how she was ever going to face her coworkers again.

Wondering if everyone could see how her legs were shaking, Eleanor stood next to the CEO while he droned on and on about the hospital and what a blessing it was in the community.

Then he did something horrible. He turned to Eleanor to give a welcome-and-thank-you speech.

Immediately, the full-blown panic attack she’d been fighting most of the day took over. Her heart picked up pace, doubling in tempo. A hot sweat broke out on her skin, making her palms immediately feel sticky wet. Her tongue attached itself to the roof of her mouth and refused to budge.

She took a deep breath, reminded herself that the rapid pounding of her heart was just anxiety and not that her heart was really going to explode from fear of being in the spotlight.

Although the blonde at his side felt it necessary to continue to chat softly to him, Ty's attention was focused solely on the woman standing next to her bosses. His bosses.

In direct opposition to the low-cut-cleavage and long-leg-revealing dress, her ethereal face looked fragile, pale, out of place.

Ty didn't have to see the pulse jumping at the base of her throat or the tremor of her knees to know she was nervous.

Nervous? More like petrified.

She appeared as delicate as a butterfly's wing and just as beautiful with those big brown eyes of hers and that full mouth.

A mouth made for kissing.

She'd always kept to herself so much that he'd taken it as a sign that she wasn't interested.

Was it possible he'd mistaken shyness for disinterest?

She stirred something within him, but he'd just labeled it as curiosity, considering she was the only female he knew who didn't fall into flirt mode whenever he was near.

He was definitely curious. Beyond curious.

More like intrigued by the plethora of contradictions that defined his colleague.

The CEO waited for Eleanor to speak.

The rest of the crowd waited for her to give her speech.

A too-long pause settled over the crowd.

"H-hello. It—it is ..." A few stuttered words began escaping her quivering lips. "An honor ...an honor to be here. Today. This

evening, I mean.”

“She sure isn’t her sister,” a man next to Ty with a camera in his hands grumbled under his breath.

Surprisingly, Ty’s fingers curled, the man’s comment rubbing him up the wrong way. Why he felt so protective of a woman he wasn’t certain he even liked, he had no clue. But he found himself wanting to speak up, to defend her. How could you defend someone you didn’t really know?

Still, he shot the man a silencing look. “Not everyone is a polished speaker, but Eleanor is a fantastic doctor and woman.”

The man’s bushy brows drew together then he shrugged. “Whatever, pal.” Then he went back to snapping photos.

Not looking anyone in particular in the eye, Eleanor began speaking again, and Ty found himself letting out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

“Th-thanks to everyone for coming to this wonderful occasion where we’re celebrating the opening of a new neonatal wing at the Angel Mendez Children’s Hospital.” She paused, swallowed hard, then smiled what he knew was a forced smile before she continued. “M-many of you know pediatrician Federico Mendez started this hospital during the depression after the death of his much-loved son, Angel, who suffered from polio. My father, Senator Cole Aston, wishes to continue the tradition started by Federico Mendez.”

Her expression tightened and she cleared her throat, pausing too long yet again.

Come on, Eleanor, he mentally willed her on. Just thank everyone for coming again and be done.

“It is with that same generous and caring spirit that my father donated the funds for this new neonatal wing in the hope that—that ...” Between stutters, she thanked everyone for coming to the ribbon-cutting. Then, not seeming to know what else to say, she turned imploring eyes on the CEO.

Imploring eyes because she was begging to be rescued.

How was it possible that a woman who’d had to grow up in the public eye could be so socially backward? Surely Cole Aston would have enrolled her in some prep courses to prepare her for public speaking?

And the stuttering? Was that lifelong or something she just did when she was nervous?

Tyler wished he knew. Wished he knew lots of things about the enigma showcased in a flashy red dress.

Rather than rescuing her, the CEO looked as if he had no clue at how on edge she was. Instead, he made another big hoo-ha, then handed Eleanor a large pair of showy scissors.

Immediately, she almost dropped them but managed to recover in the nick of time. One of the men beside her rolled his eyes. Ty saw red and not just the red of Eleanor’s hot dress and cheeks.

His gaze shot back to hers, saw the fear, saw the shaking of her hands, the sheen of perspiration that glistened on her skin. Something moved inside him.

Literally, something in his chest shifted.

Dear heavens, she was going to pass out.

Ty might be known as a womanizing son of a gun, but he was a chivalrous son of a gun. His momma, God bless her big Southern heart, would have beaten his hind end otherwise, and rightly so.

He might have left his horse in Texas but, hell, no one else was stepping in to save the good doctor.

Despite the fact that he was feeling a little off-kilter himself at just what a knockout body she'd been hiding under her scrubs, at whatever that odd sensation in his chest had been when he'd looked at her just a moment ago, at admitting to himself that he'd been interested in her all along, playing the role of white knight to Eleanor's damsel in distress came as natural as counting one, two, three.

Eleanor couldn't breathe.

Couldn't move.

Wasn't even sure how she was hanging on to the scissors that she'd somehow managed to position over the ribbon.

All she had to do was close her hands and the ribbon would slice.

So why weren't her fingers cooperating? Why weren't they closing around the handle?

She needed cooperation, needed to get out of there before she toppled over on her face or sagged to a humiliating puddle at the feet of her bosses. Not to mention that her dress would burst wide open if she made any sudden movements. Wouldn't

the press have a field day with that?

Jelly Ellie's belly exposed yet again.

She winced, fought back the horrible thought of the photo of her happy, pudgy, eight-year-old self hanging out of her bathing suit while hugging her cute and cuddly little sister forever captured by the paparazzi. She reminded herself she wasn't that little girl anymore who'd been crushed by their cruel jokes and taglines that she carried too much weight. She was an accomplished woman, a doctor. She could do this.

Make the cut. Just squeeze your fingers together and cut the ribbon.

Nothing happened. Except that her palms grew more and more clammy. Any second the scissors were going to slip out of her sweaty hands and fall to the floor.

Headlines around the city would read *Senator Cole Aston's daughter doesn't make the cut*. Folks would nod their heads in agreement, make comments that they'd known she wasn't good enough to get the job done, that had the lovely Brooke Aston been there all would have been well.

"Dr. Aston?" the CEO prompted from beside her, his low tone warning for her to get on with the program.

She wanted to. Really, she did. But panic had seized her and, except for the trembling within her, she stood frozen in place.

The room began to spin, to darken. She was going down. She'd be mortified. Her father would blame her. Brooke would blame her. The hospital would blame her.

She prayed that when she went down she would bump her head and lose her memory, that she'd lose all recall of the day's events. Amnesia would be a blessing.

But rather than fall to the floor, a strong pair of hands closed over hers, applying pressure and closing her fingers over the scissors handles. The ribbon split in two and each end drifted toward the floor in a dainty float that Eleanor watched as if in a surreal dream.

The sound of the applause and cheers—and was that a sigh of relief?—came from some faraway surreal place, too.

When she turned her head and looked up into the twinkling brown eyes of her savior, she was definitely somewhere other than reality.

Because Tyler Donaldson winked at her and drawled a breathy, “Hi, there, darlin’.”

As if it was the most natural thing in the world for his hands to be over hers, he motioned his head slightly toward the crowd. “Better paste a smile on that pretty face of yours ‘cause there are a lot of folks capturing the moment for posterity.”

Who was this man and what had he done with the real Dr. Donaldson, who never spoke except in regard to patients?

She gawked at him a second longer, then turned and forced a smile to her face the same way she'd done a hundred times before. She thought of happy times. Thought of medical school and how hard she'd worked, at how proud she'd been to accomplish something her daddy's money and power couldn't buy, something

she'd had to do on her own. Something that didn't require glamour, glitz or a hot little body.

Although her smile stayed on her face, her mind didn't go to her happy place. Oh, no. Her happy place was all tangled up in Tyler's hand still covering hers, holding hers, of the electricity and warmth burning into her at his touch.

He gave a squeeze as if he wanted to reassure her that she was going to be okay, that he was there and wouldn't let her fall on her face.

Oddly enough, she believed he wouldn't.

Which was crazy. He flustered her, barely knew she existed, so how could he possibly be rescuing her from total mortification?

Her knees weakened, and she swayed.

Tyler's hand immediately went to her waist, steadying her, resting low on her back. "Just smile, babe. You're doing just fine. It's almost over."

Easy for him to say. She had to face the reception afterward, mingle with the bigwigs while representing her father, her family.

But Tyler didn't leave her side.

He stayed and smiled right there with her. He kept his hand at her back and his strength gave her the fortitude to keep her smile in place even though she really just wanted to curl up into a ball and cry.

When the photographers finally had their shots and moved on to their next victim, Eleanor let out a long breath and looked at

her rescuer.

“Th-thank you.”

One side of his mouth lifted crookedly in a half grin. “No problem, sugar. You looked like you needed a helping hand.”

Speaking of hand, his still rested against the curve of her back, burning through the thin red material and branding her skin.

“I don’t like crowds.” Were those the first words she’d ever actually formed around him without stuttering, grunting or mumbling? Finally, coherency.

“I noticed.”

She smiled despite the nervousness still chipping away at her resolve. “Now, if only this party were over.”

“Over?” He glanced around at the smiling, laughing people and shook his head. “Why would we want the party over when the night is so young?”

“I don’t like crowds, remember?” She crinkled her nose and frowned up at him. Goodness, the man was tall. Probably about six-four. Maybe everything that came from Texas was big.

He grinned down at her, then tweaked her nose with the tip of his finger. “I tell ya what, darlin’, you just relax. Have some fun. I’ll handle the crowd.”

She glanced around at the people making their way into the room that had been decked out for the celebration. “But surely you have someone with you? You always have someone with you.”

“You’re right. I do.” He winked then leaned close to her ear.

“Tonight that someone is you, Eleanor. My friends call me Ty, by the way, and you and I are definitely going to be friendly.”

CHAPTER THREE

ELEANOR LAUGHED OUT LOUD for what seemed like the hundredth time that evening. Honestly, she couldn't recall the last time she'd laughed so much.

Had she ever?

"You are very pretty when you laugh, Eleanor."

Now, there was a comment worth laughing at.

"Because you keep saying funny things," she told Tyler, not quite meeting his eyes. He'd complimented her repeatedly during the evening. Good thing she knew his reputation, that he was an incurable flirt.

With a grin that was way too intoxicating, he touched her face. "I want you to laugh at what I say, but only when I'm saying something worth laughing at. I was serious. You are a very beautiful woman, Eleanor."

Despite the fact that she was sure he didn't mean her to laugh, she couldn't suppress the nervous little giggle that spilled from her lips. "Yeah, well, th-thank you."

Because, really, what else could she say?

"Tell me about that," he urged in a slow drawl.

She bit her lower lip, hoping he wasn't asking what she thought he was asking.

"Your stutter."

Face flaming, she shook her head. "Nothing funny about my

stuttering so let's not talk about it."

"Have you always stuttered?" he asked, as if she hadn't just spoken.

"Perhaps you didn't hear what I just said. I don't want to talk about me."

"But I do. You fascinate me."

Had he been drinking? The hospital wasn't serving anything alcoholic, but perhaps someone had spiked the punch.

"When I was younger, I—I stuttered all the time. These days it usually only h-happens when I'm in a stressful sit-situation."

He studied her a moment. "Am I a stressful situation?"

"Men are always stressful," she answered flippantly, because she didn't want to label anything at all about the way Tyler made her feel. Not the way he'd made her feel before tonight and especially not the way he was making her feel at that very moment.

He leaned his long frame against the hospital wall they stood near, crossed his arms and regarded her. "Ya know, I just realized that during the entire time I've been at Angel's I've never heard a thing about you and a man, Eleanor. Is there someone special in your life?"

Had the room suddenly grown hot? Her skin had certainly grown clammy.

"Not at the moment."

"Lucky me."

Not sure what to say, Eleanor glanced around the lobby that

had been converted into a reception area for tonight's gathering. The crowd had started to thin and most of the press had left.

"I should probably quit monopolizing your company," she said, realizing that he hadn't left her side the entire evening.

"Please don't, darlin'."

She glanced up at him.

"I want you monopolizing my ... company."

Her breath caught. He was flirting with her. Really flirting. If she'd had any doubts earlier, now she didn't.

The only problem was that Tyler Donaldson flirting with her was way out of her league. As in she wouldn't know how to flirt back if her life depended on it.

So she just smiled and took a sip of her punch.

He had the audacity to laugh, causing her gaze to return to him. When their eyes met, she found herself laughing back.

She wasn't sure exactly what they were laughing at, but a giddy happiness flowed through her, along with a shared connection with Dr. Tyler Donaldson that was both unexpected, a bit magical and so exciting she could barely breathe.

"Who's the hunk?"

Totally lost as to what Brooke meant, Eleanor glared at her sister across the Aston penthouse's breakfast table. Brooke's face was masked by a thick layer of medicated cream.

Eleanor had gotten up that morning determined to accomplish one thing. To kill her sister.

Not literally.

Maybe.

But seriously, Brooke had gone too far this time. Even though the night had turned out nothing short of wonderful thanks to Ty, that didn't mean Brooke wasn't going to get an earful.

"Don't try changing the subject," she warned, tapping her finger against the glass tabletop covering the rich mahogany. "You broke into a hospital doctors' lounge and stole my clothes."

"I," her sister put great emphasis on the pronoun, "didn't do anything. And don't change the subject." Brooke's head bobbed with attitude, which should have come across as ridiculous, with her platinum hair tied up and flying every which way, thick white cream covering her still-swollen face and her body wrapped in a fuzzy pink terry-cloth robe, but which somehow didn't look ridiculous at all.

Even while suffering from an allergic reaction, her sister managed to pull off cool.

Brooke slid that morning's paper across the breakfast table. "Who is he and where can I get one? He's yummy. Introduce me."

"What are you talking about?" But even as Eleanor finished asking she saw exactly what her sister referred to.

More like who her sister referred to.

Oh, no.

Oh, yes.

A photo of Eleanor and Ty was splashed across the top of the society section of one of New York's top newspapers.

Not just any photo but one that appeared to have been edited because she knew they hadn't really been looking at each other in that manner.

Okay, so she might have been looking at Ty that way because, let's face it, he was hot and *friendly*.

"Although," Brooke mused, frowning, "he's looking at you as if he's about to sweep you off your feet and find the closest place to get you alone. Who is he?"

In the picture, he was looking at her as if he thought her the sweetest thing since chocolate syrup and he'd like to cover her in that syrup and lick her clean.

Wow. No wonder Brooke wanted to know who he was. But, no, her sister couldn't have him. Not Ty. Which was a crazy thought because if her sister wanted Ty, she'd have him. Brooke always got what she wanted. Especially when it came to men.

"It's a trick of the camera." Perhaps it really was. Although, recalling how wonderful Ty had made her feel, perhaps it wasn't. The man knew how to make a woman feel as if she were the only woman in the world. No wonder all the female staff at Angel's adored him.

"Huh?" Brooke's collagen-enhanced lips pouted. "He isn't really that scrumptious?"

"He is, but ..." She trailed off, her stomach sinking. She'd meant that he hadn't really been looking at her as if he found her irresistible. Maybe he really wasn't, but he had helped her get through what had started as a horrible evening but, because of

him, had ended almost feeling enchanted.

She glanced at the photo again. She was looking into Ty's face as if she found him enchanting. Although you couldn't see his hand, she knew that his palm had rested low on her back, that his thumb had traced lazy patterns over the smooth material of the red dress. That his hand had been somewhere on her body at most points during the evening. Her lower back, her arm, her hand, her face. He'd touched her almost incessantly.

Almost possessively.

He'd felt sorry for her and his Southern good manners had demanded he rescue her. That had to be it, right?

"I couldn't be more pleased."

Both girls spun as their father entered the room.

Entered? Ha. More like invaded the room. Because when Senator Cole Aston entered a room even imaginary dust took cover. A trail of servants followed, all scurrying to serve the great man his breakfast and to meet any need he might have before he could even voice his desire.

"Morning, Daddy," Brooke cooed, blowing an air kiss in his direction as she popped a bite of melon into her mouth.

Glamour girl Brooke had always been their father's favorite. Eleanor couldn't blame him. Although the "it" party girl, Brooke never went so far as to cause their father to do more than shake his head with an indulgent smile. Her, on the other hand, he just didn't understand. Why would she want to work so hard getting her medical degree when her financial security wasn't an issue?

Why work such long hours at a free hospital that she collapsed exhausted into sleep night after night when she could live a life of leisure, travel at whim as her mother and sister did?

She knew she was a disappointment and had been for most of her life. She'd been the pudgy, geeky, plain-Jane misfit who'd had to stand next to her handsome, intimidating father, her elegant, classically beautiful mother and her glamorous, much-loved and ever-popular, beauty-queen sister.

Yeah, she was pretty sure she'd been swapped at birth.

There was some dull, plain, geeky family out there scratching their heads at how they'd ended up with a beauty-queen daughter who thrived on the limelight.

"I didn't realize you were back," Eleanor ventured. He'd been in Washington, D.C., in meetings all week, which was why he hadn't been able to attend the ribbon-cutting himself.

"Daddy, aren't you going to say good morning?" Brooke pouted, tucking her leg beneath her in her chair and turning more fully toward him.

For once, the senator ignored Brooke and smiled—or as close as he got when a camera wasn't present—at Eleanor. "I flew in late last night. You'll bring him to my campaign fund-raiser next week, of course."

Him? Then she noticed what he carried. A copy of the same newspaper Brooke had shoved at her. The one with the picture of her and Ty. Her father was happy about that? Really? Then again, he was probably just amazed that some man had paid attention

to his elder daughter.

“He’s just a friend. Not even that, really. More of an acquaintance.” At the arch of his salt-and-pepper brow, Eleanor rushed on. “We work together at the hospital. He’s nobody, really.”

“He’s somebody all right, and I want him with you at the fundraiser.”

Eleanor’s gaze met her sister’s. A still-pouting Brooke shrugged, obviously not having a clue what their father was talking about either.

“His family owns about half the state of Texas. If I ever throw my hat in to run for president, he’ll be our ace in the hole.”

She didn’t know which shocked her more. That her father already had her paired off with Ty, that Ty was wealthy or that her father thought he might someday run for president.

That he’d plan her life choices around what best garnered votes didn’t shock her in the slightest. She’d dealt with that her entire life.

“How do you know anything about Dr. Donaldson?” she asked slowly, knowing she wasn’t going to like his answer.

Her father’s gaze narrowed slightly at her calling Ty by his proper name. “I figured the son of a gun was just after your inheritance so I called my attorney first thing this morning and had a background check run.”

Because her father hadn’t believed any man would want her for herself, only for her cut of the Aston fortune. Great. Had he

ever had any of Brooke's many beaux checked out?

Probably not, since her sister never seemed interested in the same man for more than a week or two. Then again, perhaps the senator did have each one thoroughly investigated and perhaps that's why none of them lasted more than a week—because they weren't worthy of his precious baby girl.

"He checked out," her father announced, sounding somewhere between smug and surprised.

"You've already gotten a report on his whole life history? Wow. That was fast work." Head spinning, she took a deep breath. "Well, you wasted your time and money, because Dr. Donaldson is a colleague from work." Sure, they'd had a great time the night before, but it wasn't as if she expected him to actually call and ask her out. They were friends. Sort of. "Nothing more."

Not liking being ignored, Brooke tapped the newspaper picture again. "This doesn't look like just work."

Her father smiled in that way that didn't convey happiness, just arrogance that he was right and that he would get his way because he was Senator Cole Aston. "I should have known you'd be contrary."

Shocked at his comment, Eleanor stared at her father. Because she was known for her contrariness? Hardly, unless he counted her going to university, getting a medical degree and actually working for a living. If he counted that then, yes, she was quite the contrary child.

“No matter.” He waved his hand dismissively then took a sip of his black coffee. “I’ve already taken matters into my own hands.”

That didn’t surprise her in the slightest. However, the implications of his comment terrified her.

“What do you mean, you’ve taken matters into your own hands?”

“I sent the car for Dr. Donaldson. He should be arriving ...” he glanced at the slim gold watch on his wrist “... any moment.”

Brooke squealed, her eyes widening. She jumped to her feet. “Daddy! You can’t invite people here when my face is all messed up.”

The senator ignored his younger daughter, his gaze instead boring into Eleanor. “Perhaps you’d like to go freshen up before he arrives?”

Heat rose to the tips of Eleanor’s ears. Her father had sent the car for Ty? How had her father even known she’d be here? Had he cared? If her father said that he would be arriving any moment, that meant Ty had gone along with her father’s request. Then again, Cole might not have requested anything. He’d probably demanded that Ty come.

Great.

She’d thought she was going to die of total mortification last night, but perhaps that honor had been saved for this morning.

Ty had ridden in a limo a few times during his life, but none of the luxurious caliber of Senator Cole Aston’s. Although he

definitely preferred Ole Bess, his affectionate nickname for the Ford pickup he'd driven since first getting his license, he couldn't deny that he'd been impressed.

But, then, he was pretty sure that had been Senator Aston's intention.

That and to perhaps intimidate him.

Not that Ty was easily intimidated. Only his own father seemed capable of achieving that.

Obviously, Eleanor's old man had seen the picture of his daughter with him and wanted to know his intentions.

He had no intentions.

Not toward Eleanor. Not really.

Yeah, she'd piqued his interest last night and once she'd gotten over her shyness she'd been funny and intelligent.

He'd enjoyed the evening more than he would have believed possible.

He'd found her incredibly intriguing and, yes, he'd admit it, he found her sexy as hell.

But that didn't mean he had any intention of seeing Eleanor outside the hospital. Something told him she wouldn't be a love-'em-and-leave-'em-smiling kind of experience.

He didn't do any other. Which meant he should stay away from the good doctor. Which was why he hadn't made any move on her at the end of the evening, despite the fact that he'd wanted to kiss her repeatedly. Hell, he'd wanted to do a lot more than kiss her.

But he'd settled for a goodbye hug and he'd gone home alone. The senator had nothing to worry about.

The elevator ride to the penthouse of one of Manhattan's most prestigious apartment complexes overlooking Central Park was an experience in and of itself. Ty had to smile at the seat along one wall and wondered if he was wicked for thinking of all the fun ways that seat could be used by him and ...

He stopped, realizing that rather than some random hot babe popping into his head, the woman making use of that seat with him was Eleanor.

Which shocked him. Hadn't he just reminded himself that she wasn't his type?

Senator Cole Aston's daughter.

How had Eleanor ended up shy, sweet, compassionate and hardworking when she'd grown up in the lap of such luxury?

Then again, thinking about what he knew of Cole Aston, perhaps Eleanor's childhood had been more hellish than his own.

Which wasn't exactly fair, because his childhood hadn't been bad. Not really. It hadn't been until he'd gotten older, known his life was going in a different direction than his family envisioned that the problems had started with his father. The rest of his family was ... things he wasn't going to think about. Not right now when he was about to get his butt chewed for latching on to Eleanor the night before.

The Aston penthouse suite was something straight out of a magazine on luxury living. The fancy living quarters probably

had been featured in a magazine. Several of them. Ty almost felt as if he should take his shoes off before stepping onto the shiny hardwood floors.

Following a well-dressed woman who'd introduced herself as the head housekeeper, he entered a large room containing a long mahogany table, with Senator Aston sitting at the head and Eleanor to his right. Fresh flowers adorned the elaborately set table.

The bright red splash of color that infused Eleanor's cheeks and the quick way she averted her gaze told him she hadn't been behind his summons.

Perhaps she didn't even want him here.

Was that disappointment shooting through him?

No way. He hadn't really thought Eleanor had sent for him. He hadn't even expected her to be here as she'd told him the night before that she lived in an apartment of her own. Ty had known it was her father planning to whip out the shotgun and tell him to keep his good-ole-boy hands off his precious daughter.

No worries. He'd already decided to do that.

"Glad you could make it, Dr. Donaldson." The senator stuck out his hand and Ty shook it firmly. "Have a seat. Next to Eleanor, of course."

Senator Aston had a future in acting should he ever opt out of politics because no way was that welcoming tone real. Had he really just invited Ty to sit next to Eleanor?

Wondering what he'd gotten himself into, he sat.

“Can we get you some breakfast, son?”

Son? What the ...?

“No, thank you, sir. I’ve already eaten.”

“Coffee, tea, juice?”

What was with the host with the most?

Eleanor was now shooting daggers at her father.

“No, thanks.” He searched her face, but she wouldn’t even look his way. When she finally stopped glaring at her father, she just stared at her breakfast, which it didn’t look like she’d much more than touched. So he met Senator Aston’s eyes and decided to cut to the chase. “You asked to see me?”

The man smiled and a shiver ran up Ty’s back.

“I wanted to meet the man who spent the night with my daughter.”

Ty didn’t wince or glance away from the man’s penetrating gaze. He wouldn’t show weakness around this man who was obviously used to everyone bowing to his command. “Eleanor is a grown woman and surely makes her own choices as to who she spends her time with.”

Which wasn’t what he should have said. He should have pointed out that they hadn’t spent the night together.

Only a very public evening. Something about the man got Ty’s hackles up.

“Until I saw this morning’s paper I hadn’t realized she was spending time with anyone,” the senator countered smoothly, taking a sip from his coffee cup. “She tells me you work

together.”

Her shoulders having dropped at her father’s words, Eleanor’s face now glowed rosier than any bloom in the flower arrangement. Once again, Ty found himself feeling protective.

“Yes, she’s a brilliant pediatrician. One of the best Angel’s has.”

Senator Aston waved off Eleanor’s accomplishments and focused on the real reason he’d summoned Ty. “What are your intentions regarding my daughter?”

That’s more like what he’d come expecting to hear.

“Daddy! Please.” Eleanor scooted her plate back, stared at her father. “I told you that Ty and I are only work colleagues.”

Ouch. Why did Eleanor’s words sting?

“Ty?” Her father’s brow arched, then his dark gaze settled directly on Ty in question.

Here was his opportunity to set the record straight and get the hell out of Dodge.

“It’s too early to say what my intentions are regarding your daughter.” Which wasn’t what he’d meant to say, but those words had somehow come out anyway.

“What?” This had come from a very shocked, very red-faced Eleanor. “But you ... you didn’t ...” Her voice trailed off, not verbalizing that Ty hadn’t kissed her when they’d said goodbye.

Ty’s gaze remained locked with her father’s.

“I’m very protective of my daughters.”

Ty bit back a grin. “I imagine so.”

Eleanor's father leaned back in his chair, eyeing Ty as if he were sizing up an opponent. He took a sip of his coffee and calmly announced, "I want you to accompany Eleanor to my fund-raiser ball next week."

That surprised him, but Ty only shrugged. He wouldn't be bullied by this man. "I'm busy."

"Get unbusy," the senator ordered, as if whatever Ty's plans were they couldn't possibly be more important than his.

"Eleanor may have other plans."

"She doesn't." Had there been humor in the man's tone? "This is important to my career and the perfect opportunity for me to get to know what type of man my daughter is spending her time with."

Ty wasn't sure how he felt about going to the fund-raiser. He liked Eleanor, but hadn't he already decided that he needed to stay away from her? That she would expect more from him than he'd ever give? But there was something about the way her father was discussing her as if she weren't in the room that got Ty's hackles up, made him want to puff out his chest and stand in challenge.

What was it about the woman that gave him all these protective, testosterone-filled urges?

"I prefer to arrange my own dates."

The senator sat his coffee cup down on the table and eyed Ty intently. "Fine. Arrange one. Now is as good a time as any. I'm sure Eleanor is available the night of my fund-raiser."

“Daddy.” Eleanor’s voice sounded so humiliated Ty wanted to whisk her out of the room. Hell, he knew exactly how she felt. Hadn’t his own father loved to put him in his place every opportunity he got?

His father. His family. Which only served to remind him of his own family issues and the fact that his mother wasn’t letting up on him coming home to attend Swallow Creek’s annual rodeo, which his father was hosting. Just the thought of going home, seeing the shame in his father’s eyes as he expounded on what a disappointment Ty had turned out to be, turned his stomach. It would be the first time he’d be face-to-face with dear ole Dad since their big row about Ty moving to New York.

He’d be damned if he was going to face it solo when presented with such a golden opportunity.

“Fine,” he agreed to the senator’s suggestion, liking the idea that had struck him. “I’ll go to the fund-raiser.” Just as the pompous man started to smile, Ty added, “On one condition. I want Eleanor to go to Texas with me six weeks from now to attend a rodeo my family is hosting.”

With her by his side, his family would be on their best behavior, would be distracted by him bringing a woman with him, and maybe, just maybe, his father wouldn’t launch into how he’d screwed up his whole life and let the entire family down by following his own dreams rather than to follow in his father’s footsteps.

“Done.” Smiling again, the senator stuck his hand out for Ty

to shake.

“What?” Eleanor’s chair flew back from the table, almost toppling she stood so quickly. “Th-this is crazy. You’re talking like I’m not even here.” She glanced back and forth between them. “You’re both crazy. I’m not going to Texas.”

Wondering what the hell he was doing, Ty shook Eleanor’s father’s hand before any of them could come to their senses.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELEANOR AUSCULTATED ROCHELLE'S tiny chest, distinguishing each sound and praying the baby's lungs remained clear of fluid or pneumonia despite her many risk factors.

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