

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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HOME on the RANCH

JILLIAN HART

HIS COUNTRY GIRL



GRANGER
FAMILY
RANCH

Jillian Hart
His Country Girl

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To fulfill a sick boy's wish, rodeo star Tucker Granger surprises little Owen in the hospital. But no one is more surprised than single mother Sierra Baker. She figures the carefree champion for a different kind of man. One who doesn't spend hours talking cowboy code with a hospital-bound child. One who can't have her dreaming of a second chance at love. Somehow, Tucker ropes her heart and fills it with hope. Hope that this country girl and her son can lasso the roaming bronc rider into their family forever.

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“Tucker!” Owen beamed up at his hero. “You came. You’re really here and everything.”

“Sure I am, buddy.”

If her son's eyes got any bigger, they would roll right out of his head.

“Mom, it's Tucker Granger! We saw him on TV when he showed that bull who was boss and set the new record. I saw. He's the best.”

Tucker's warm chuckle rang with good humor and not self-importance as she was expecting. “Hold on there, little cowboy, I just had a good day. You didn't see me a month later getting thrown off a bronc five seconds in and breaking half the bones in my body.”

That was exactly why she couldn't fall for a man like Tucker.

JILLIAN HART

grew up on her family's homestead, where she helped raise cattle, rode horses and scribbled stories in her spare time. After earning her English degree from Whitman College, she worked in travel and advertising before selling her first novel. When Jillian isn't working on her next story, she can be found pattering in her rose garden, curled up with a good book or spending quiet evenings at home with her family.

Jillian Hart
His Country Girl



Direct my steps by Your word.
—Psalms 119:133

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Chapter One

Denver's January cold had crept into her bones. Sierra Baker shivered, rescued her hand-knit cardigan from the back of the uncomfortable black chair in the hospital's waiting area and watched a nurse pad down the hall to the busy nurse's station. No sign of Tucker Granger yet. She wrapped her arms around her middle for comfort and thought of her six-year-old son in his room. He was waiting for a visit from the rodeo rider he'd specifically requested of the children's wishing charity.

And the man was late. Her stomach had twisted into such a tight knot she could hardly breathe. Minutes had ticked by, minutes which had felt like hours, and anxiety was about to gobble her up.

Remember, God is in charge. That thought comforted her enough that she could settle back into her chair and gather up her knitting. The needles felt cool against her fingertips as she wrapped a strand of soft blue wool around the needle and began a row. It gave her something to focus on other than the fact her son was facing surgery bright and early in the morning.

He's going to be all right. She had to believe that. Her town pastor had encouraged her to be positive. Owen was in God's hands. She had to trust that this surgery to cure his heart problem would go flawlessly and he would be well.

"Sierra Baker. Is that you?" A man's amused baritone boomed across the waiting room, at odds with the somber, hushed tones around her.

Why did it have to be Tucker Granger? Of all the rodeo champions in the West, why did Owen want him? She and Tucker were from the same hometown. They'd gone through school together. She did not like him or the way he bounded into sight with his signature megawatt grin. That grin could make every eligible woman in a five-mile radius dream, but not her. He might be one of the most well-known bronc riders in three states, but her heart rate remained unaffected.

She folded up her knitting and rose from the chair. "You're late."

"Fifteen minutes, tops." Tardiness didn't concern him, obviously. He simply flashed his double dimples, the ones that could make him outshine a movie star, and the cane he walked with became hardly noticeable. "It was a battle getting from the airport. The planes are grounded. God was watching out for us because my flight was the last to land."

"I'm grateful, for Owen's sake." She didn't want Tucker to think she was one of the poor, perhaps misguided women who thought a man chasing notoriety and a carefree lifestyle was attractive. Not just a carefree lifestyle, she corrected, glancing at the cane he leaned on, but a dangerous one. The whole town back home had been buzzing with concern when he'd been injured months ago at a competition.

Why did his eyes flash amusement, as if he were laughing at her? That was another thing she didn't want to like about the man—his perpetual good humor.

"How is the little tyke doing?" He turned serious and jammed his free fist into his leather jacket. Snow dusted the brim of his hat and the wide expanse of his linebacker shoulders. His deep, lapis-blue eyes radiated a genuine concern, reminding her of the boy she used to know when they'd been in the same third grade class. The boy who had given her his lunch when bullies on the playground had taken hers. She'd almost forgotten that boy.

"Owen is doing as well as can be expected." She took a step toward the nurse's station. "That's why I was waiting out here. I want to talk to you before you see him."

"Sure. What's up?" He shifted the strap of a backpack on his shoulder.

A child's backpack, she realized. One with the rodeo association's logo and a bucking horse and rider printed on it. Thoughtful of him to bring a gift. She slowed her pace, so they wouldn't arrive at Owen's room too quickly.

"His surgery is in the morning. I don't know if Janelle told you."

"Sure she did. She said Owen's a pretty sick little boy right now."

“Yes, but he’s going to get better.” He had to. She set her chin, determined to stay strong. “He’s fragile and we’re trying not to upset him.”

“That’s the last thing I want to do.”

“Please don’t mention his father.”

“You mean Ricky isn’t here?”

“He couldn’t be bothered.” A long, painful story, one she so did not want to get into. “Owen is very sensitive about his dad’s absence.”

“I understand. Anything else I should know?”

“Just that he is really excited about you coming to see him.”

“Hey, it’s the least I can do. You’ve served my family how many meals at the town diner?” Kindness softened the rugged planes of his granite face. How the man could possibly get any more handsome was a complete mystery.

“More meals than I can count.” She had been a waitress in the town’s only diner since high school. “Your family is always so great to me. Your dad is a shamelessly big tipper.”

“He’s generous to a fault.” Affection edged into his voice when he spoke of his father. Everyone knew Frank Granger was one of the good guys. Tucker, who looked nearly identical to his dad, had his mother’s restlessness, as many in the town had said, but he didn’t look restless as he fastened his honest gaze on Sierra. “Everyone in Wild Horse wants me to let you know that they are all praying for Owen. That’s a lot of prayer coming this way.”

“I know. I can feel it.” She didn’t seem as alone. Somehow it was as if all those loving prayers and well wishes wrapped around her like an invisible hug. “There’s nothing like the community of a small town. I would be lost without everyone there.”

“We’re all anxious for you and Owen to come back home safe and sound and well again.” For a happy-go-lucky man, Tucker could be steady and solid. Dark hair tumbled from beneath his hat, which he swept off as he raked the strands out of his eyes. “I’m praying for Owen, too. I was touched that he asked for me. He could have wanted a visit from an ex-president or a celebrity.”

“There’s no accounting for taste.” The quip surprised her. She hadn’t been in a light mood in many months. Tucker’s chuckle rumbled through the sterile hallway like sunshine, causing a nurse and a patient in a wheelchair to turn his way and share a smile.

Owen’s door was open, and the little boy was on his hands and knees on his bed watching for the first glimpse of his hero. Sierra stayed behind and let Tucker go in first, love overwhelming her at the happiness chasing across her son’s pale face.

“Tucker!” Owen beamed up at his hero. His hand swiped at his dark hair falling into his big blue eyes. “You came. You’re really here and everything.”

“Sure I am, buddy. If I remember right, you and I have met before.” The big man swept off his hat, his tone warm and friendly as he stuck out his hand. “Once at church when I was back home for Christmas and a long time ago at the diner.”

“Yep. I was almost done with my chocolate milk-shake when you came in. You had a big shiny belt buckle then, too.” Owen slipped his small pale, bluish hand into Tucker’s sun-browned one and shook like a little man. “Is that cuz you were the champion?”

“You know it. Of course, I haven’t won anything lately.”

“You got thrown off a horse. That’s why you’ve got that cane, right?” If his eyes got any bigger, they would roll right out of his head.

“Goodness, lie back, Owen.” Sierra moved into the room, using her mother’s tone because she was comfortable in that role. It created distance between her and Tucker as she circled entirely too close to him to reach her son’s side. She plumped his pillows and patted the top one. “Come on, you need to take it easy.”

“But, Mom, it’s Tucker Granger! We saw him on TV when he showed that bull who was boss and set the new record. I saw. He’s the best.”

Tucker's warm chuckle rang with good humor and not self-importance as she'd been expecting. "Hold on there, little cowboy, I just had a good day. You didn't see me a month later get thrown off a bronc and break a bunch of bones."

"Wow!" Owen flopped against his stack of pillows, his entire attention focused on his hero. "Did it hurt lots?"

"Sure did. That's why I'm still walking with this cane. But I'm better now." Tucker Granger shrugged one big shoulder as if his injuries were no big deal. Of course, in her opinion grown men should not be trying to ride a horse that did not want to be ridden in the first place. Men like that, regardless of how impressive they seemed, were the kind who refused to grow up. She had issues with that sort of a man, since she'd regrettably married one of them.

"I hear you've got a big surgery coming up." Tucker sat on the edge of the bed, his deep blue gaze tender with concern. "Do you know I had some surgeries, too?"

"Wow. Did it hurt?"

"Not too bad, but then I did everything the doctors said to do. And I didn't have a nice mom to take care of me like you have." He kept it light, his tone easygoing, but it was impossible to hide the worry. "Look what I brought you."

"A backpack? Cool!"

"Not just any backpack. It's an official rodeo association one. I had a few buddies of mine sign it for you." He gave the pack a turn to show the dozen autographs and read each one aloud.

Okay, that was thoughtful. That had to have taken him a lot of time. But she couldn't let that influence her opinion of the man—of men like him.

Fine, so she was projecting. She could admit it. But the pain of Ricky's swift and abrupt abandonment was still raw. He'd been gone for nearly two years, and the wound made by his departure had never healed. She had talked to her pastor, turned to prayer and handed it over to the Lord. Yet the injury remained, one that haunted her.

Tucker Granger was not Ricky, she reminded herself, although her ex-husband's carefree attitude was not so different.

"Wow! A horse!" Owen had unzipped the backpack and began pulling out treasures. The foot-high plastic sorrel horse with matching mane and tail was beautiful.

"Not just any horse," Tucker explained. "That's just like Jack."

"Jack's your horse!" It was good to see Owen so happy. "I saw you win with him, too. It was awesome!"

"Thanks, buddy." Cute kid. Tough to think that tomorrow morning he would be undergoing open-heart surgery. He could see the strain on the mother's face. Sierra Bolton, Baker since her marriage. He zipped the backpack open wider. "Go ahead and dig in, Owen. There's more."

"More?" The little guy didn't let go of the Jack replica. He plunged his free hand into the depths of the bag, hauling out a rodeo T-shirt in his size, a child's book about a rodeo horse and several G-rated DVDs Tucker figured the boy might like.

Last of all was a stuffed bull wearing a T-shirt and a nose ring. Something for the boy to cling to when the going got rough. It couldn't be easy recovering from that kind of surgery. Since he'd spent his share of time in a hospital bed, Tucker could empathize.

As the boy exclaimed over each gift, Tucker's gaze kept drifting to the woman perched on the edge of an uncomfortable-looking chair. Sierra. He hadn't given her much thought, not even on the rare occasions he was home and his family dragged him out to dinner in town. He hardly recognized her without her apron and notepad. She'd grown tall and willowy, her girlhood imperfections polished away by time and maturity.

She was a beauty, with those big gray eyes and soft oval face framed by long locks of tumbling blond hair. It was hard not to admire the gentle slope of her nose, her wide-set eyes and delicate bone structure. Hard to believe she'd once been a wallflower hiding behind black-rimmed glasses,

the kind of girl who handed her homework in early and landed on the honor roll every semester. The kind of girl who shied away from a boy like him. He figured that was the one thing that hadn't changed about her.

"Thank you, Tucker." Her gaze met his like a touch, and the shock bolted through him like lightning, leaving him a bit dazed.

"No problem." He hoped his grin didn't falter. He didn't normally have that reaction to women. In fact, he'd never had anything happen like that before.

"Thanks, Tucker!" Owen's excitement vibrated through the air. He studied one gift after the next with undisguised amazement. Even though he was on oxygen, it didn't seem to slow down his enthusiasm. "What's it like to ride real Broncos?"

"I'll be happy to tell you, but that will be a long tale." Tucker took in the subtle signs Sierra Baker was trying to hide—the exhaustion bruising the delicate skin beneath her eyes, the tension furrowing her brow and the tight purse of her mouth as if she were doing her level best to keep all her fears inside.

Something told him she hadn't been getting a whole lot of sleep and probably wouldn't get much, if any, tonight with the surgery looming. He took in her long hair falling straight and unadorned without a single pin or barrette or doodad. Her clothes looked ruffled, not wrinkled exactly, but as if they'd spent too much time in a suitcase, and they hung on her. A good size too large, he figured, judging by the hem of her sweater sleeve that hit her mid-palm and the cinch of her belt, the old notch where it used to be worn visible.

"Why don't you go and take some downtime?" He felt sympathy for her. He couldn't imagine his own mother putting any one of her children's needs above her own. Not that she had been a bad mother. She just hadn't been a good one, which was why he appreciated the quiet sacrifice of care Sierra made for her son. She sat on the edge of her seat, ready to leap up in case he needed anything. "I can handle things here. You go grab yourself a latte or a bite to eat. Maybe even a nap."

"No, I can't leave him." With a man she couldn't count on. She didn't say this but he could sense it. Her hands curled into small fists. "He might need me."

"I'm sure he will, but the truth is Owen and me, we need some quality man-time. It's a guy thing." He winked, hoping she would mistake his concern for her as something lighthearted. He couldn't let it get around that fearless Tucker Granger had a soft spot. That would destroy his hard-won tough-as-nails reputation. "No way can I discuss the secrets of my trade in front of a woman."

"Mom." Owen seemed scandalized, already anticipating that she wasn't about to step foot outside the door. "You can't stay. Tucker is going to tell me secrets."

"Why can't he tell them in front of me?" She flicked a lock of gold hair behind a slender shoulder. Chin up, she didn't look a thing like the wallflower he remembered. She didn't sound like one either. "I can keep a secret."

"Sure, but what about the code?" Tucker let his eyes twinkle at her because he knew the effect it had on the ladies. There wasn't a single time he didn't get his way when he turned on the charm.

Not that he wanted to charm Sierra Baker. She was a divorced mom and that carried a whole lot of responsibility. Not that he didn't respect her for it, but obligation like that made him leery. After watching all that his dad had gone through in life, he'd played it safe and avoided entanglements of any kind. Life was easier without them, but lately he wasn't sure it was better.

"What code?" She squinted at him, and he would have given up half a year's pay to know what was going on in that head of hers. He couldn't begin to tell if his charm was working or—shockingly—backfiring.

"The cowboy code." He winked and pulled up his best smile. He knew the effect his dimples had. Mostly from experience and the fact that he had inherited them from his dad. Half the unmarried ladies in White Horse County back home harbored secret crushes on his father. He sure hoped the dimples worked for him half as well. "Don't you want me to share it with Owen?"

“Yeah, Mom? Don’t you want him to share?” Owen was no slouch. He caught on quick. “Please?”

“I know when I’m not wanted.” With a ghost of a smile, she rose from her chair and picked up her bag. Two knitting needles stuck out of the outside pocket. “I’ve got some phone calls to make. I won’t be long.”

“Take your time,” Tucker urged.

“Yeah, Mom. Take your time,” Owen parroted his hero. “We’re sharin’ secrets.”

“Secrets, huh?” All it took was one look into her son’s puppy dog eyes—the look he’d perfected when he’d wanted to try to charm her into having his way—and she melted like an ice cube in Phoenix. Impossible to say no to him. His eyes sparkled, and he looked better than he had in months. But what about the man standing in front of her, with his rugged good looks and come-what-may attitude?

“Can I trust you to stay with him until I get back?” She gave him her fiercest glare, the one Owen called her death-ray stare. She meant business. “That means you don’t leave his side for any reason unless you ask Lisa on the other side of the curtain to watch him. Got that?”

“Sure. I’ll stick to Owen like glue.”

It was that dazzling smile she didn’t trust and his too-good-to-believe looks. She was only going to the cafeteria, surely she could depend on him that much. Lisa, the mom of Taylor on the other side of the room, would keep an eye out. The nurses were right down the hall and it wasn’t as if he were a stranger. She’d grown up in the same small town, rode the same school bus and endured his jokes and class clown antics through her entire adolescence. One thing she knew about the Granger family, they were decent people and Tucker had never caused anyone harm.

“We’ll be like glue, Mom.” Owen clasped his hands together, his forehead furrowed as if he was trying to will her to keep on going toward the door.

“Like two peas in a pod,” Tucker assured her, his grin contagious.

The surgeon general ought to put a ban on that smile.

“Fine. You have thirty minutes.” She ignored Owen’s shout of joy and Tucker’s wink. When she circled around him, she felt a shiver tremble through her soul like a warm wind’s touch, something she’d never felt before.

Maybe she needed a soothing cup of coffee more than she thought. She set her chin, wrapped her hand around the strap of her bag and paused at the door. Longing filled her. She didn’t want to leave Owen. He might need her.

“What secret are you going to tell me first?” Her son clutched the stuffed animal in one hand and the horse in the other. “Is it about riding broncos?”

“Yes it is, little buddy.” Tucker, his back to her, seemed focused on the boy. He radiated a strength and kindness that she didn’t want to believe in, although clearly Owen did.

Owen. Her heart warmed and her soul filled. Her son was all that mattered. She forced her shoes to carry her across the threshold and down the hall, giving her little boy the time he deserved with his hero.

Chapter Two

“What do you mean the flight is delayed?” Sierra tucked her cell phone against her shoulder and accepted the cashier’s change. Then she remembered Tucker’s comment about the planes being grounded at the airport. The implications hadn’t registered at the time, but they did now. Her knees buckled and she slid into the nearest chair. The hospital dining room and its rows of empty tables echoed around her as she dropped her bag onto the floor. “No, it can’t be.”

“It might even be cancelled.” Jeri Lynn Bolton was a sensible woman, the wife of a working rancher and mother of six kids. Sierra’s family hadn’t had a lot of resources when she was growing up, and they didn’t have a lot now. It was hard to hear her mom over the background noise in the airport. Jeri Lynn’s voice saddened. “Don’t worry, I won’t leave you alone. Your dad and I talked about me driving, but with the road conditions and a blizzard in the mountains I’m not sure what kind of time I could make.”

“No. I absolutely don’t want you driving on dangerous roads.” That made no sense at all. Her hand shook, and she set down her coffee on the table so it wouldn’t spill. She had to stay calm. Focus on the problem. See there was only one solution, whether she liked it or not. “You’ll fly in when you can. And if you can’t, then you stay where you are. I’ve got everything covered here.”

“I’m sure you do, dear, but you can’t go through this alone.”

“I’m perfectly fine.” That was a lie, but she prayed the good Lord would forgive her. She worried her mom would get in the car and come anyway. “I have everything I need here. Owen has great doctors and the nurses are wonderful. We’ll be fine.”

“You can’t wait through the surgery by yourself. I won’t have it.” Mom was upset. Worrying over her grandson’s surgery was enough.

“Don’t you worry about me, too.” Sierra set her chin, firmed her voice and prayed her own fears did not show through. She needed her mother, she really did, but she was strong enough to get through this on her own. “Besides, I haven’t heard from Ricky’s folks. The Bakers may have already landed and be settling into their hotel room right now.”

“You’re just saying that to calm me down.” A hint of relief. “I really want to be there with you, baby.”

“I know.” She bit her lip before she said anything that would reveal how much she’d been counting on her mom’s support.

“It’s killing your dad that he can’t come.”

“Someone has to stay and take care of the animals.” Her family grew mostly wheat but they had the usual collection of farm animals, which could not be left to fend for themselves. “You are not to drive under any circumstances. Do you understand me?”

“How did I raise such a bossy daughter?”

“I can’t imagine.” Sierra treasured the gentle trill of her mother’s laughter.

“Say, did Tucker make it in? Owen will be so disappointed if he has to cancel.”

“They are together right now. The two of them kicked me out of the room. I’m a girl and therefore not privy to their conversation.” She managed to keep her hand steady enough to take a sip of the hot, sweet coffee.

“How cute. Owen must be on cloud nine.”

“Pretty much.” She took another sip, but it didn’t steady her or calm the nerves rocking around in her stomach.

“Tucker comes from a fine family.” It was hard to miss that lilt of meaning in her mother’s voice. Jeri Lynn was an optimist. “Honest, hardworking folk. And he’s single.”

“He’s perpetually single.” Tucker Granger married? She couldn’t picture it. That was where the similarity between him and Ricky ended. Marriage had suited Ricky just fine, as he liked being

waited on and tended to, until the going had gotten rough. She couldn't picture Tucker settling down long enough to put a wedding ring on a woman's finger. "His life is wandering from rodeo to rodeo. You'll have to find someone a little more stable to marry me off to."

"Then I'll keep trying." Beneath her mother's breezy quip vibrated the worry for Owen she was fighting to hide.

Sierra knew just what that was like. She'd been battling to do the same for the last six months, as Owen's health problems had gone from moderate to serious. "You'll have to try pretty hard," she quipped back. "It takes a great man to be better than no man at all."

"I don't know who quoted that saying to you, but it's wrong. Your father isn't a great man, but he's better than nothing." She burst into giggles, maybe from stress rather than her gentle joke.

Sierra giggled, too. The tension was definitely getting to her. "Dad is a good man."

"I know. I just couldn't seem to help myself." Recovering, Jeri Lynn gave a sigh, as if she were prepared to compose herself. "Bad news. They've cancelled the flight. Unless the Bakers made it in, you're on your own, baby."

"I'm not alone, Mom. I can feel your love from here."

"That's right, and I'll keep it coming."

Silence fell, and Sierra knew what her mom was too choked up to speak. They were never alone, not really. She had never relied more on her faith than during the last few months, especially today. Tomorrow, her faith would be all she had to see her through the surgery to save her son's life.

"I'm having second thoughts, baby. I can still drive. If I leave right now—" Her mother paused as if calculating time and distance. "I should be able to make it in time."

"I said absolutely not." She couldn't stand the thought of her mom alone, driving through the night, battling ice, weariness and terrible conditions. "We already settled this. You're staying home."

"Maybe I can get your brother to come with me. We can trade off driving."

"No. Don't you see? I'm holding it together but if I have to worry about you, too, I don't think I can do it." She liked to think she was strong enough to handle everything, but it wasn't true. She bounced out of the chair, grabbed her bag and her mocha and headed for the exit. "Go home and stay with Dad. You two can call me tomorrow as many times as you want. We can be together that way."

"I don't like it."

"When the storm clears, you can fly in. It might be better that way. Owen will get to spend more time with you." Her voice hardly cracked, and she was pleased. The last thing she wanted was for her mom to guess how unnerved she was. The surgeon had gone over with her the risks of anesthesia, surgery in general and everything that could go wrong with the delicate procedure.

Concentrate on the positive, she reminded herself.

"He will be just fine." No one could comfort like a mother. Jeri Lynn's voice shone with certainty and love, as if she could will everything to be all right.

Sierra breathed in as much of her mother's comfort as she could. Her sneakers squeaked on the tile floor as she wended her way to the elevators. "Owen is going to get through this surgery the way he does everything. With flying colors."

"That's right. He's one special little boy."

"By this time tomorrow, he'll be in recovery and doing well." There was nothing like a little wishful thinking to put spring in a woman's step. She punched the elevator button.

"You call if you need me, baby girl." Jeri Lynn's voice rang as warm as a hug. "Anytime. Even if it's the wee hours. You hear me?"

"I promise, Mom, but I'll be fine." She intended to be fine. She intended to handle the worry, the fear and the wait in the best way possible. The doors opened. "I'll talk to you soon, Mama."

She tucked her phone in her pocket and smiled briefly at the other occupant of the elevator car, a nervous-looking accountant-type holding a small bouquet of flowers, who did not smile back. She hit the floor button and leaned against the wall. How was Owen faring with Tucker? She warmed

from the inside out picturing her little boy's excitement. He was probably still clutching the plastic horse and the stuffed bull, basking in his hero's presence.

"Hi, Sierra." Allie, one of the nurse's aides, smiled as she hurried by. "I see Owen has a visitor. A handsome visitor."

One look and all women were charmed. Honestly, Sierra shook her head. "He's Owen's charity wish."

"I was wondering if he was yours." Allie wagged her brows.

"Not a chance." She rolled her eyes. She'd become far too sensible to wish, even just a little.

"Then I'm going to wish for him. Christmas is already past, but I can start on my list for next year." With a wink, Allie whisked around the corner and out of sight.

Wish? It had been a long time since she'd wished for anything for herself. Sierra skidded to a halt in the corridor, drawn by the sound of her child's voice. All her wants and prayers had gone to her son. First during the rocky year before the divorce, to protect him as much as she could from the marital unhappiness, then to helping him cope with the separation from his father, who had chosen to leave town. And then she tried to shield him from his worsening health.

All I want, Lord, she prayed as she stood mesmerized in the hall by the sight of her little boy's wide grin, is for him to be healthy again. That's all I want. Nothing more. All her lost dreams, the long string of workdays on her feet from dawn until dusk and the tatters of her heart were nothing by comparison.

He still held the plastic horse in one hand and hugged the stuffed bull in the curve of his other arm. He was thin. He'd lost weight, his appetite had dwindled, but his baby blues sparkled and pleasure flushed his face. He hadn't spotted her yet because his entire attention was fixed on the man telling a tale.

"And then the bull gave one final kick. I ducked." Tucker crouched as if he were missing a bull's hoof by a hair and blew out a dramatic sigh of relief. "A half inch closer, and I would have been in big trouble."

"But you weren't. You showed that bull!"

"I did, but I'm not sure who came out the winner. Me or him. He gave me a good fight. Don't know how I managed to stay on as long as I did." Tucker's baritone vibrated with laughter. "Back in the barns I paid a visit to that bull."

"You did? What happened? Did he try to kick you?" Enthralled, Owen leaned closer, squeezing the stuffed bull in the crook of his arm harder. "Is he a mean bull?"

"He's powerful. He spotted me coming and he remembered me." Sounded like a tall tale to her, but he was entertaining Owen so she didn't hold it against him. Tucker leaned closer to the boy, as if to make the story more intense. Dark hair dropped over his high forehead, and in profile the straight blade of his nose and the square cut of his jaw were impressive.

Not that she was noticing.

"His eyes got big. His nostrils flared." Tucker raised one arm, imitating the animal. "He pawed the ground, and I heard a low, menacing growl."

"Wow. Oh, wow." Owen's eyes became impossibly bigger. "What did you do?"

"I pulled a handful of molasses treats out of my pocket like this." Tucker held out his hand, palm up. "Slayer turned his head to glare at me with one eye, then he snatched the pellets out of my hand and let me rub his poll."

"Wow. You tamed him!"

"He's a good guy. He's just very good at his job, which forces me to bring my A-game when the gate opens." Tucker was obviously good with kids. She didn't want to like him, but she couldn't find fault with him for that.

As if he had become suddenly aware of her, he glanced over his shoulder. A slow grin spread across his face, revealing those lady-killer dimples. “You managed to stay away all of twenty minutes. We agreed on thirty. I want a full half hour.”

“One thing you have to learn about me, Tucker.” Why was she smiling, too? “I don’t make it a habit to do what a man wants. Any man. Even you.”

“Duly noted.” He crossed his arms over his chest, as if appraising her. “You have to go away. Owen and I have ten minutes left. All my secrets have not been revealed.”

“Yeah, Mom. We’re busy.” Owen bounded on his knees, the rasp of his oxygen like a knife to her heart. She hated seeing him like this, but the happiness radiating from him was worth the step back she took.

“Okay, fine. I’ll go away.” As hard as it was to leave her son again, she would retreat to the waiting room and knit a few more rows.

“Well, now, I guess we don’t want to drive you off.” Tucker hooked the chair she’d been sitting in with his foot and tugged it out of the corner. “Maybe you can stay if you vow not to divulge anything you hear.”

“I make no promises.”

“Beware, I’ve been known to charm the most cantankerous and ornery of animals. It might even work on you.” His wink was a step away from downright laughter.

“I’m not ornery.” She was so not sure about this man.

“I didn’t say you were, but you do look tired and I did ask you to take a break. Since you refused to listen, you might as well come put your feet up. I can always hope I bore you so much you drift off and take a nap.”

“As you are completely dull and lackluster, it’s likely to happen.” She settled into the chair and set her bag on the floor. “Is this all right, Owen? I don’t want to intrude on your guy-time.”

“I guess, but we’ve got to talk about bull and bronc riding.” Owen looked adorable, her little angel. “He’s gonna teach me all about it.”

“I won’t interfere. Promise.” She held up her cup and took a sip. Now that she could see her son was all right and happy and her separation anxiety was eased, she did feel a little more relaxed. “Go on with your tale.”

“My tale? I assure you this is the bona fide truth. Cowboy’s honor.” Tucker laid a fist across his heart. “Slayer and I aren’t friends exactly but we respect one another. He’s good at what he does and I am, too. Some days I’m the victor and some days he is.”

“You talk to this animal? That’s how you know he respects you?” So, she was giving him a little sass. Maybe he deserved it, maybe he didn’t. But any man who looked that amazing and who had enough charm to disable half the female population in six states could use a little humbling.

“Sure I do. Slayer and I have had some good conversations.”

“You mean you like Slayer?” Owen seemed amazed.

“Just because he and I are adversaries in the pen doesn’t mean it’s personal. He’s one of God’s creations, too.” The lilt remained in Tucker’s voice but his smile disappeared. “That’s one of the first things my dad taught me. You don’t be unkind to an animal. God gave them life for a reason and if He cares about the smallest sparrow, then He cares about all His creatures. He’s watching how you treat them. He’s trusting us to do it right.”

“I learned that in Sunday school.” Owen nodded, seriously. “We learned about sheep and the Shepherd, too.”

Fine, so the cowboy secrets weren’t what she’d expected, but she liked being privy to them. She leaned back in her chair and took another sip of her drink. It was chocolaty and soothing, the room was warm and the last few weeks of little sleep and incredible worry caught up with her. Exhaustion wrapped around her like a welcome hug.

“Sounds like you’re learning the right stuff.” Tucker’s deep voice rang low and pleasant. “The thing about Slayer is he likes putting on a show and acting tough. You can see it in his eyes. He sizes you up before a run, like he’s figuring out how fast he can get you to the ground.”

“But he tries to gore you.” Owen sounded confused.

“Sure, he gets carried away. He doesn’t have reasoning powers the way humans do, but he isn’t out to hurt you. He gets all wound up and his instincts take over. You can’t fault him for that.”

“What about the horse that stomped you?”

Tucker’s voice grew blurry, one word rumbling into the next, hard to discern. Her eyelids felt so heavy. Maybe she should close her eyes. She could listen and rest at the same time, couldn’t she?

The sound of Tucker’s voice murmured pleasantly, growing dimmer and dimmer until there was only silence.

“I learned to ride bulls and broncs on sheep.” It was hard to miss the woman snoozing quietly, her chin tucked to her chest, sitting relaxed and slack and peaceful. She sure must be tired to drift off like that. That chair didn’t even look close to comfortable. She’d been out a good twenty minutes by his count, maybe more.

“On a sheep?” Owen looked a little doubtful. “You can’t ride a sheep.”

“Sure, I can’t now, but that was back when I was a little guy about your age.” The kid seemed to be lapping up his stories, so he figured, why stop? He didn’t want to disappoint the boy. And if he himself were facing heart surgery the next day, he’d want to be distracted, too. “I kept pestering my dad to ride like the rodeo, so he finally caved and borrowed a few of the neighbor’s sheep. I was a mite disappointed, I tell you, when my dad brought me out to the corral all pleased as punch. He figured I’d be real excited but the truth was, I was thinking, a sheep? That’s not the same as bronco riding.”

“A sheep isn’t a horse.” Owen laughed, as if that was obvious.

“Exactly. Then my dad put me on Fluffy’s back. That sheep took off like a wild thing and I slid right off. I landed on my backside in the dirt thinking that was the most fun I’d ever had.” The memory had him laughing. “My dad chuckled and ambled over to me and dusted me off. He said, ‘What did you think of that, son? You think that’s a sissy ride now?’ All I wanted was to get back on that sheep and ride him better each and every time.”

“Wow.” Owen’s face fell and he stared hard at the bull tucked tight against his chest. With his head bowed, his cowlick stuck straight up, making him look both cute and vulnerable. “What’s your daddy like?”

“My dad?” The question startled him. He shot a glance at Sierra, still asleep in the chair. He did his best not to notice what a beautiful woman she was and the pretty picture she made, there in her light pink sweater and well-worn jeans, like a snapshot to be treasured over time. Her warning popped into his head. He knew the boy wasn’t bringing up the issue of his missing father, but it was implied in that question.

How did he handle it? He studied the kid for a second, taking in the downcast look and the wistful tone of his question. Couldn’t hurt to talk about Dad. There wasn’t a better father on this earth than Frank Granger.

“I get my animal sense from him.” Tucker was surprised at the wash of memories that hit. He spent most of his adult life either on the road or keeping up his training. Riding was an art, one that required practice every day and kept him far from his childhood home. That was the way he’d wanted it, so he was hard pressed to explain the beat of longing for family, for his dad.

“Was he a rodeo rider, too?” Owen asked, head up, eyes sad.

“Nope. He is a hardworking rancher. He is a good dad. The kind that’s patient and steady. He listens. He was always there taking care of Mom and us kids. He taught me to whisper to the animals.”

“Whisper? You mean you can talk to them?”

“Sure you can. You just open your mouth and say stuff.”

That bit of humor almost distracted the boy from the father discussion. Owen broke a hesitating smile and rolled his eyes. “I know that. Anybody can talk to ’em. But how do you do it in horse?”

“That’s a good question. Not everyone can.” The memories came quietly and as welcome as a Wyoming summer, breezing through him stirring up images of his dad kneeling down, hands out, baritone rumbling like song. Frank Granger was a big man, several inches over six feet, and he’d seemed like a giant to the six-year-old boy Tucker had once been. A gentle, powerful, able-to-do-anything father he could always lean on.

“The secret is easy.” Tucker said the same words to Owen that his dad had told him. “You put your feelings in your voice and in your hands and you leave the door to your heart wide open.”

Chapter Three

Sierra blinked, staring at the man, his words resounding inside her. Maybe it was sleep clinging to the corners of her mind making things fuzzy, but had Tucker Granger truly said that? She didn't realize that a man like him—one who was always laughing, carefree and without a single tie in the world to bind him—would know anything about what lived inside the heart.

“Look who is back with us.” His smile warmed his voice, and she'd never thought of a man's tone as cozy before, but his was. “Sleeping Beauty is awake.”

“Sleeping Beauty. Really?” Groggy she may be, but she wasn't that out of it. She shook her head. “Is there an off switch to that charm of yours? It's getting a little much.”

“I'll turn it down a notch.” Good humor sparkled back at her. The man dazzled, that was for sure, and it was hard not to hold it against him. “Feeling better?”

“A little.” Good thing she'd kept her cup upright. It was tilting a bit but hadn't spilled. She took a sip of the lukewarm goodness to give her a moment to compose herself.

“Just in time.” He rose, tossing a smile at someone behind her shoulder. “Looks like pizza is here.”

“Pizza?” She hadn't ordered any. The delicious aroma of dough, red sauce and pepperoni filled the air.

“Pizza!” Owen looked beyond amazed. “Really? Pepperoni and everything?”

“You betcha, little buddy.” Tucker handed over a generous tip and took charge of the boxes and container of drinks. “I can see by that big frown they forgot to clue in your mom. I had Janelle clear this with your team of docs.”

“Oh boy! Goody.” Owen beamed joy. “Thank you, Tucker. Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“You're welcome. I'm partial to pizza myself.” He slid the boxes on the bed. “When I'm on the road, I eat way too much of it. I'm on a health kick these days, eating well so I heal up right. I can't tell you how much I've missed this stuff.”

“Me, too!” Owen squeezed the stuffed bull in a big hug. “My mom says pizza is not a food group. You're only supposed to eat food groups.”

“Really? That's just plain wrong.” He hauled out a cup of cola from the drink holder and handed it over to her. While he was jovial, it was easy enough to read the understanding somberness in his impossibly dreamy eyes. “Pizza has dough, so that's as good as a whole grain right there.”

“No, it isn't. This is a white-flour crust,” she argued, laughing, too. “There is a difference between processed flour and the real stuff.”

“Sure,” he said, as if he didn't believe her one bit, his dimples deepening.

She set her coffee on the floor and reached for the drink he held out to her. Her fingers curled around the cold circumference of the cup and brushed the heat of his calloused, sun-browned hand. A spark snapped down her arm like an electric shock, startling her. He didn't seem to notice, pulled away and kept on talking, but the charge kept tingling and seemed to dig into the marrow of her bones. What was that? Her imagination? Static electricity in the air?

“There's the red sauce,” Tucker went on, unaware of her reaction as he flung open one of the boxes. “That's made with tomatoes or tomato paste or something like that. That counts as a vegetable. And the cheese is dairy. Pepperoni is meat, so that sounds like four food groups to me.”

“Me, too!” Owen was happy to agree, seeing as how he was about to benefit from the argument. “Tucker? Which is the biggest piece?”

“Let's see.” Tucker grabbed a napkin and considered the pie in front of him. “This one, do you think?”

Owen leaned forward, studying the slice his hero was lifting onto a napkin. Cheese strings stretched and broke, red sauce dripped and pepperoni grease oozed.

“Yep,” the boy said with satisfaction. “That one’s the best piece. Can it go to my mom?”

“Sure, buddy.” What a sweet kid. Tucker held out the piece to Sierra, doing his level best not to be affected by her. It wasn’t her beauty that was getting to him, but something deeper, something he admired more than he wanted to admit. “It’s only right that ladies are served first. I’ve got pineapple and Canadian bacon in the other box if you’d rather have it.”

“This is great.” She didn’t meet his gaze but took the napkin carefully and this time their fingers didn’t touch.

He couldn’t say why that was a letdown. It wasn’t as if he was interested in the woman. He wasn’t looking for a connection or for reasons to like her.

“Which piece for you, cowboy?” he asked the kid, who had already picked out the slice he wanted and pointed. “You’re going to have to put down Jack and Slayer.”

“This is Slayer? Cool.” Owen seemed pleased with that, although he had a hard time putting down either toy. He debated which one to let go of first, carefully released the plastic horse and set him on the bedside table. Then he propped the stuffed bull against the pillows and tucked him beneath the covers, like a good dad would.

After handing over the slice, Tucker took one for himself. “Sierra, something tells me you’re just itching to say grace.”

“I’m more curious to see what you are going to say.” She had the most amazing eyes, the color of rain clouds gleaming in the light of a winter’s dawn. She was softer toward him and there was no mistaking the curiosity playing at the corners of her pretty mouth.

“Don’t worry, I’m not short on prayers.” Truth was, he was a praying man, faithful to the core. He’d been brought up that way, and living on his own had reinforced his beliefs. He bowed his head, realizing his hands were full of food so they couldn’t join hands. It might have been better to pray before doling out the pizza. Although he was a faithful man, he wasn’t a farsighted one.

“Dear Father,” he began, peering through his lashes to make sure Owen was doing the same. Was it his fault that he noticed Sierra, too? She was a wholesome sight, her golden hair cascading over her shoulders, true faith poignant on her heart-shaped face. He wondered what silent prayer she sent heavenward, considering tomorrow’s events. “You are so good to us with all the blessings You bestow on us and on this world. I want to thank You for bringing me here today to get better acquainted with Owen. I’m sure You know and love Owen well. He’s got a big day scheduled tomorrow. We ask that You watch over him, so he can get well and run and play again. And, if it’s possible, let him ride a bronco one day.”

“Amen!” Owen called out with excitement. “I’d sure like that.”

“Amen,” he muttered, biting his bottom lip to keep from laughing, noticing that solemn note in Sierra’s quieter amen.

“This is good pizza.” Owen chomped away, collapsing against his pillows beside Slayer. “The best. So, when do I get a bronco ride?”

Uh-oh. He immediately felt the pull of the boy’s wish and the mother’s unspoken disapproval. Looked like he was in trouble again. Since all eyes were on him, he swallowed hard, took a sip of cola to wash down the bite of pizza and fashioned what he hoped was a diplomatic answer. “That would be up to your mom.”

“Thanks.” Sierra shook her head at him and her disapproval didn’t seem as serious as before. “Thank you so much for putting that on me.”

“You’re entirely welcome. It was my pleasure,” he quipped. “What, you don’t want him to turn out like me?”

“Do you think I would?” She was laughing now, mostly because Owen was bouncing on the bed again, frail of health but hearty of spirit.

“I can ride, can’t I, Mom?” Owen begged. “Tucker told me how. I can do it.”

“So I heard.” She took a sip of soda, buying time, her forehead crinkling a bit as she thought strategically. “We’ll talk about it once we’re home and you have the doctor’s consent.”

“That means no.” Owen sighed. He slumped, too good a boy to pout at not getting his way, but his disappointment was sincere and palpable.

“That means you have to heal up first.” Tucker chimed in, figuring he’d better lend Sierra a hand before he fell further into her disfavor. “That’s what I’m doing. I haven’t tried to ride since I got out of the hospital. I haven’t even thought of riding. I’ve got to get this leg back to normal, then I get to deal with what comes next.”

“Oh. Okay.” Owen took a bite of pizza, scrunching up his face as he considered the possibilities. “I’m gonna be a cowboy one day, just like you, Tucker.”

“It’s my guess you’ll make a better one.”

“He’ll be the best, whatever he does,” Sierra chimed in, resolute, watching her son. Her mother’s love was easy to read. It polished her; it made her radiant with an inner beauty that took his breath away.

He forgot what he’d been about to say. Words vanished on the tip of his tongue, leaving him mute. He’d never seen this side of Sierra before, never really had the chance. One thing was for certain. No other woman had ever intrigued him the way she did with her steadfast love and concern for her child. It touched him down deep, where he never let anything in.

“Do you got a trailer?” Owen’s enthusiasm broke into Tucker’s thoughts, bringing him back to the conversation. The kid was already working on the crust of his pizza as he awaited the answer.

“I have an RV.” Tucker realized he was holding a piece of pizza and took a bite. Swallowed. “It’s home to me when I’m on the road, which is a lot.”

“Did you drive it here?”

“Nope. It’s parked at home in my family’s garage.”

“With your dad?” The boy’s eagerness changed into something more, a look of longing and loss. His love for his father remained in spite of his abandonment and the years of separation.

“Yep, with my dad.” Sympathy filled him. He’d gone through something similar with his mom when she’d been alive. He understood the pain of an inadequate parent. “And with my sisters, too.”

“Does your dad tuck you into bed at night?” Owen wiped tomato sauce off the corners of his mouth using a napkin and boyish swipes, but there was no missing the longing in his big eyes.

“Not anymore.” He could feel Sierra’s gaze like a touch against the side of his face. He could feel her worry that he would upset the boy with his answer. Not going to happen. “Do you know why Dad always tucked me in when I was a little guy?”

Owen shook his head.

“Because my mom wasn’t there. She decided she didn’t like living on the ranch and doing all that hard work, so she skedaddled. She used to read my bedtime stories and tuck me in, but when Dad took over that was nice, too.”

“Your mama left?”

“Sometimes that happens. It’s sad, but you are the luckiest guy I know.” Tucker wadded up his napkin, praying that he said this just right. “God must love you to have blessed you so much.”

“Really?” That lit the boy up, the sorrow fading and sadness vanishing.

“He gave you the best mom in the world.” He resisted the need to look at the woman seated so near to him he could hear the slight gasp of her shock. A strange liquid warmth rolled through his chest somewhere in the vicinity of his heart, an emotion he did not want to acknowledge or to feel. “I sure didn’t get a mom like that.”

“She is a pretty good mom,” Owen agreed, carefully considering his answer.

“Glad you agree.” Tucker wanted the boy to know that what he had was more important than what he’d lost. Tucker had spent a chunk of his life figuring that out. Might as well save the boy the

trouble. “Your mom stays with you no matter what. She’s here with you right now, right? And she’s so cool that I even let her listen to some of my cowboy secrets.”

“Right.” Owen slowly grinned. “And she lets me pick what’s on TV.”

“That’s what I figured.” Tucker eased off the bed, his chest tight, his comfort level shattered. He liked to keep a safe distance. He liked things easy and breezy, not weighty and serious, and most of all he didn’t want any entanglements. He cared for the boy. Didn’t know how it had happened, but there it was. An unspeakable pain wedged between his ribs, a sign of more emotion he did not want to feel.

“Time to go,” he announced, his stay had already gone well beyond the time the charity had requested of him. So it wasn’t a bad thing that he needed to get some fresh air, away from the strange tug this little boy and his mother had on him.

“Do you have to go?” Owen asked, disappointment setting in.

“Tell you what. I’ll give you a call when your mom gives the go-ahead to see how you’re healing up after your surgery. How’s that?”

“Great. Mom, did you hear? Tucker’s gonna call me. We’re friends.”

“I heard.” Sierra’s voice sounded thick with emotion, layered with feelings that did more than tug at him. He felt them—her worry for her son, her gratefulness that he was happy and her wariness of a has-been rodeo rider making promises she feared he wouldn’t keep.

“Got a pen?” He snagged a napkin off the stack and waited while she dug into her purse. “I’ll leave my cell number so you can get ahold of me. Let me know what a great job Owen does in surgery.”

“I’ll be asleep,” Owen laughed.

“Sure, but you’re going to be the best patient ever. The surgeon is going to be in awe at how well things go.” Tucker didn’t like thinking of the precious little boy undergoing something so serious. Strange and unwelcome pain bored deeper into his chest and it took hard work not to let it show. He grabbed the pen Sierra offered him, seeing the same dread reflected on her beautiful face.

“This time tomorrow,” he went on, turning his attention to scrawling out numbers on the napkin, “your mom will call and tell me how fantastic you’re doing and that I had better find me a good sheep because you’re ready to start learning the trade.”

“All right!” Owen clasped his hands together, as if overcome with joy.

Only then did Tucker realize what he’d done. He’d promised to teach the boy without clearing it first with his mom. Ouch. That was one big mistake. He stared hard at the pen and napkin in hand, knowing recrimination was about to come in one form or another. It was his experience that most mothers did not want their sons to grow up to join the rodeo.

“I’ll give you a call.” When Sierra spoke, there wasn’t veiled anger layered beneath her quiet alto. Not even a hint of coolness or a tone of disapproval. What he heard instead made him turn toward her, surprising him like nothing could. She smiled, taking the pen and napkin from him. “It’s a good thing your neighbors raise sheep. We’ll know just where to look.”

“Right.” His throat tightened. Words tumbled straight out of his head. He felt awkward and wooden as his boots hit the tile and he grappled for his cane and his hat. He didn’t know why he could see her heart, but he could. She was grateful for his offer because it gave Owen hope; it gave her hope, that there would be a lifetime of tomorrows yet to come for her and her son.

“You be sure and watch some of those movies,” he told the boy. “The one with the wooden toy cowboy is my favorite. When I talk to you, I want to hear what you think.”

“Sure. Bye, Tucker.” Owen wrapped his arm around the stuffed bull and held on tight.

The picture he made, sitting frail and small in his hospital bed, tore at him.

“Thanks for having me over,” he said, taking a step into the hall before he realized it was true. He thought he’d been doing a favor for the charity, but he’d been wrong. The favor had been for him.

Sierra was on her feet, following him into the hall. Light played in the multihued layers of her hair, golds, honeys and platinums glinted beneath the fluorescent lamps. She looked lighter than when he'd met her a few hours ago, so luminous it hurt to gaze at her.

"I can't believe everything you did for Owen today." Her fingertips landed on his forearm. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." Her touch felt like the sweetest comfort he'd ever known and he did not pull away. "You promise to call? I want to know when he's out of surgery. I've got a sheep to find."

But that wasn't what he meant and judging by the gleam of emotion pooling in her gray eyes, she knew it, too. The sheep wasn't the problem. It was his concern for the boy.

"Promise." Her lower lip trembled and she fell silent, as if she could not risk saying more. She firmed her chin and straightened her slender shoulders. So much strength for such a wisp of a woman, and seeing it made him admire her all the more.

"Goodbye, Sierra." The emotion wedged between his ribs arrowed impossibly deeper. He forced his feet to carry him down the hall and away from the woman responsible. It had to be sympathy he felt for her because, as every woman he'd ever dated had told him, he wasn't capable of more.

Chapter Four

Sierra yawned wide, covered her mouth with her hand and hated that her brain felt full of cobwebs. She stared at her phone, wondering why her mother's cell kept going to voice mail. It was probably the storm that had blown out sometime in the night. Still, a lot of services were compromised this morning. She sat straighter in the chair, trying not to make any distracting sounds in the surgical waiting area. A handful of other people anxiously waited on the surgeries of their loved ones, too.

She dialed again, tucked her phone to her ear and sighed. She missed her mom, but it strengthened her to hear the sound of her voice on the recorded message. She waited for the beep. "Hi, Mom. I don't know where you are. The home phone isn't in service either. Owen has been in surgery for about an hour. So far, so good—at least there hasn't been any word otherwise. I'll try calling you in a little bit. I love you."

She disconnected, hating the lonely, frightening feeling creeping in around the edges of her heart. That same worried terror had haunted her the night through, keeping away all chances of real sleep. Open-heart surgery came with risks, ones she had vowed not to dwell on but they surged around her now like a tidal wave. What would she do if something went wrong? She couldn't lose him. Owen was her world, every part of her life that was good and beautiful.

Lord, please keep me on the right path here. She swallowed hard, slid her phone into the outside pocket of her purse and gathered up her knitting from the empty chair beside her. Help me to see the positive and keep all doubt away. Help Owen's surgery to go perfectly.

Those words made her think of Tucker Granger's visit yesterday. He'd found it so easy to be optimistic and the assurance in his rumbling baritone had been strong, strong enough to touch her now.

Footsteps came to a rest beside her. She glanced up, shocked to see the man towering above her, handsome, thoroughly masculine and invincible. Tucker Granger tossed her a strained grin, a shadow of the bright one he'd mesmerized her son with yesterday.

"Thought you could use a friend." He held out a cardboard drink container with three covered paper cups. "And if I don't qualify as a friend, then I figured bringing three different kinds of coffee might give me that status for the morning."

"It's possible, but only a temporary one."

"Awesome." He settled into the chair beside her and stowed his cane. "I've got a regular, a latte and a mocha. You get first pick."

"Definitely the mocha. Thank you." Her hands started to shake, so she let her knitting fall into her lap. Relief flooded her. "Why aren't you warm and comfortable in your hotel room?"

"I felt cooped up." He extricated a cup from the container and held it out to her, his fingers a shocking warmth against hers as she took the coffee.

"Cooped up? So you thought going out in the aftermath of a blizzard with half the city streets still unplowed would be a good alternative?"

"Absolutely. A little blizzard doesn't scare me. Besides, I've been where you are before. Years ago when my dad was shot in the chest scaring off cattle rustlers." His ease faded and he tensed up as if in memory. Pain crept into his features, giving him character, making him real to her in a way he'd never been before. He chose a cup of plain coffee and leaned back in his chair. "I'll never forget the waiting while he was in surgery. It was touch-and-go the whole time."

"I remember. That was a long time ago." She took a sip. "And your sister was shot before Christmas, wasn't she?"

"One of the dangers of cattle ranching, I suppose. The occasional well-armed cattle rustler." He stared into his cup, more somber than was comfortable. "It's been a tough winter. I was trussed up in traction in a hospital room worrying the whole time Autumn was in surgery. I felt the same

sick, scared feeling when Dad was fighting for his life. Turned out she wasn't hit as bad, but we still could have lost her."

"Your poor dad, worried about the both of you." Her gray eyes filled with empathy. "It's been a rough year for your family."

"And great at the same time. My big brother's married and Autumn is engaged." He gave his cup a swish to watch the coffee swirl like a whirlpool. "I'll be walking without that cane in a few more weeks, so I can check out the neighbor's sheep."

"Tough times get us through to where we need to go." She took a dainty sip of coffee, taking her time, letting it roll across her tongue.

She was pretty this morning, although she probably wouldn't think so. Her hair was pulled back in a haphazard ponytail, thick and long and bouncing against her shoulder blades. Her face without makeup was pale but luminous with her authentic, natural beauty. Her simple T-shirt and jeans had obviously been thrown on without thought. The shirt was a little askew, which he found endearing.

Not that he had any tender feelings for her. Just making an observation.

"And where is it that you are going?" he asked.

"To a place where Owen's heart is strong and well again." She didn't hesitate. Her affecting gray eyes filled as if with a prayer. "All I want is for him to be happy."

"That's what I want for him, too." He'd never spoken truer words.

He spent most of his time thinking about himself, his job and his family, sadly in that order. He didn't mean to be self-involved. He was a single man without strings or responsibilities, so his thoughts and goals naturally turned to himself. His job was demanding. He trained long hours and his best friend was his horse. He liked things this way, but he couldn't say he was happy. He couldn't say he had what mattered in life, the way Sierra did.

"I know you must be missing your mom about now and I'm one sorry substitute, but Owen is going to pull through just fine. The surgeon is going to be amazed and all that."

"So, that's your attempt to comfort me?" She shook her head. "Pathetic."

A smile stretched his mouth and dug deep inside with a glow that spread all the way to his toes. He leaned back in the chair, stretched his legs out in front of him and took another swig of coffee. "I should at least get an A for effort. I'm a cowboy. I don't know a lot about comforting women."

"Excuses, excuses."

"True, but I'm being honest. Truth is, I'm worried about Owen, too." He wasn't comfortable saying the words, but the thought of that little guy on an operating table hit him where it hurt. "Why isn't Ricky here?"

"Owen's father is having fun." She tapped her fingers against the cup, probably thinking she was hiding her anger and pain. Her soft alto sounded brittle. "I left messages on his voice mail for almost a whole three weeks, telling him about Owen's condition and the surgery they scheduled, but nothing. He hasn't even bothered to call and see how his son is doing."

"What do the Bakers say about all this?" He knew the family Sierra had married into. Their hometown was small, and they had all grown up together. "They are good people. They can't be okay with this."

"They've been wonderful. Betty and Chip have been great in-laws to me and fantastic grandparents to Owen. They are disappointed in their son." She shrugged her slender shoulders, unaware of how vulnerable she looked. She might want to pretend otherwise but her divorce had taken a toll.

He understood, which was why he kept free and clear of entanglements. That didn't mean he couldn't appreciate what she'd been through. Long shifts at the diner, working at near minimum wage. She had it tough. He didn't have to ask if Ricky was paying his child support payments.

“The Bakers were supposed to be here, too. I haven’t heard from them either.” She swallowed hard, boldly set her chin and met his gaze. “The storm has thrown a wrench into everything. I’m praying they are safe. I know they wanted to be here for Owen.”

And for her. It didn’t take a genius to guess how much her family—all her family—adored her. You would have to be a fool not to. He set down his cup. “So, what went wrong with the marriage?”

“Hey, isn’t that a little personal?”

“Sure, but we’ve got time. I’ll tell you my troubles if you tell me yours.”

“Like I would want to hear about your troubles.” A glimmer of curiosity sparkled in her eyes. “What kind of problems can a carefree bachelor have?”

“You would be surprised.” He went for humor because she looked as if she needed it to get her mind off her son. Time would fly faster that way and the surgeon would be walking in with good news before she knew it. “Women keep dumping me.”

“Because you won’t get serious with them.”

“Sure, but I still get dumped. It’s hard on a man’s ego.”

“You don’t look like your ego is hurting any.”

“You might be surprised. I spend a lot of Friday nights alone with my horse. It’s sad.”

“As opposed to scrubbing the kitchen floor after Owen goes to bed because it’s the only uninterrupted time I have to clean?”

“See? I don’t have anyone to scrub my kitchen floor. Poor me.”

There. Now laughter was dancing in those beautiful gray eyes and hooking the corners of her mouth upward. She had to know he wasn’t serious, because she didn’t hike her bag off the floor and threaten to smack him with it, the way his sisters might have.

“Yes, poor you. I’m truly surprised you can’t keep a girlfriend for long.”

“I know. I can’t figure it out. I’m heartbroken and lonely.”

“Lonely? I don’t believe it. C’mon, women must flock around you, I’m sure. They dump you eventually, but they are interested in you in the first place.”

“There aren’t as many as you think.” He may as well tell the truth. “I spend the weekend with my horse, and a lot of ladies find fault with me for that.”

“Jack is your best friend.”

“That he is. A man can always count on his horse.”

“I remember those days. My parents still have my Patches, but I haven’t had time to ride since I graduated from high school. That was a few years ago.” Some of the strain eased from her face. The tension lines across her forehead vanished as she remembered. “I got Patches when I was twelve. He was one of the best friends I’ve ever had. I shared cookies and ice cream and secrets with him. He passed away a few years before Owen was born, and I miss him.”

“I lost my first horse a while back. One of the saddest days of my life. Dagwood was the horse dad put me on when I was little. That horse and I bonded like glue. I have Jack now, but I still miss my first love.” He twisted in the chair to face her. The wide warmth of his palm covered her hand. The contact was a zing of electric spark and a comforting sweetness that made her feel less alone. Should she take her hand away and break the contact? Or pretend as if he wasn’t affecting her?

“What happened with Ricky?” His question was blunt but kind with concern. “I still don’t get why he isn’t here. I can’t imagine anyone not caring about your boy. Even I do, and I hardly know him.”

“Ricky.” There was a difficult subject. Her chest seized up like a full-scale panic attack. The truth was hard, but there was no getting around it. “Ricky said he didn’t want to be tied down anymore, so he left.”

“He just decided to walk away?” Confusion twisted across Tucker’s forehead and darkened his eyes.

“Life with me and Owen was tedious and nothing but work. So, Ricky left.” That was all she wanted to say. Anything more, and it would be too overwhelming. She could just imagine that Tucker

Granger, with his wandering lifestyle, would start sympathizing with her ex. “Good thing he got out when he did. Look at how serious and demanding our life has gotten.”

Not a good attempt at lightness, but she wished it had been. She shrugged her shoulders, hoping to hide the deep sense of inadequacy she could not escape.

“Ricky’s loss.” He looked as if he meant it. Tucker had that strong, kind, honorable thing going on, an aura of integrity and grit that made her heart flutter a tiny bit. She had to be imagining things because Tucker Granger wasn’t that kind of man.

Or was he? She couldn’t think of a single reason why a carefree, nomadic bachelor would fight his way through a city slowed down by drifted snow to bring coffee and comfort to someone he hardly knew anymore—except for one. He was more caring than he seemed and more dependable than he wanted to admit.

Not in the same league with Ricky, not at all.

“I might not be a settling-down kind of a man,” he said, grabbing his cup and lifting it as if in a toast. “But I know what matters in life. I’ll sit right here with you as long as you need me to.”

“Thanks, Tucker.” Her throat tightened with gratitude that felt too big to hold back. She was strong. She could wait here on her own just fine, but having a friend at her side was nice and an old friend even better.

She remembered the boy he used to be, joking around in class and always ready with a wise-mouthed answer sure to make everyone laugh. But he had a serious side, too, a solid personality that maturity had given him, and she was grateful for that.

“Sierra?” A woman’s voice cut through her thoughts and rose above the other muted conversations in the waiting area.

“Mom?” She twisted in her chair, elation spiraling through her at the sight of her mother, looking worse for the wear. Still wearing her winter parka and carting her carry-on luggage, the woman charged across the room. She hadn’t even stopped at the hotel room.

“Baby, I stayed all night at the airport, I pleaded my case with the ticket agent and I got on the first flight out.” Jeri Lynn set her suitcase against the wall and peeled off her gloves. “I’m here. How’s our Owen?”

“So far, so good. At least they haven’t told me any differently.” She felt Tucker’s hand withdraw from hers and she couldn’t explain why she felt bereft, why she felt unbearably lonely or why her hand continued to tingle with the memory of his comforting touch. Her mother was in her arms before she could ponder it too much.

“I can see I’m no longer needed.” Kindness, strong and good, radiated from him as he clutched his cane and pushed himself to his feet. Was it her imagination or did he seem sad, too? In a blink the look in his eyes had changed and he was the same unstoppable, untamable force he’d always been. “Give me a call when Owen’s in recovery. I want to hear how great his surgery went.”

“I will.” She caught that look in her mother’s eye. The smart thing to do would be to wave the man away as if he meant nothing at all, as if they hadn’t shared a moment of closeness, but that wouldn’t be right. He was already striding away on those long, powerful legs of his, injury and all. She managed to disentangle herself from her mother and step after him. “I can’t tell you what it meant that you came. I—”

“Don’t sweat it. I know.” He winked like a man without a care in the world, but this time she wasn’t fooled. She could see the layers beneath his dazzling, easygoing grin. He was worried about Owen, he was sad to be leaving and she didn’t know how to ask him to stay. Maybe he didn’t know how to ask either.

“Call me.” Those were his last words to her before he turned away with a plea on his handsome face she would not soon forget.

He cared about Owen. And that made her like him far too much.

“Well, now, isn’t this interesting?” Her mother sounded pleased with the situation. “That Granger boy came all this way to sit with you this morning. Maybe I should have taken a detour to the hotel, maybe showered, changed and searched down some coffee. That would have given you more time together.”

“He was only being nice, Mother.” Really. She hadn’t been able to hold Ricky’s attention. What chance did she have of keeping a man as handsome, vital and popular as Tucker? He lived a life full of constant change and excitement, even if he did confess to spending most of his nonwork time with his horse. She held no illusions. She was an average girl, and once she’d dreamed that a man could love her enough to change his ways. She would never make that mistake again.

“Tucker was Owen’s charity wish, you know that. He came here this morning for Owen.” She gave her mom one more hug before recovering her knitting, which she’d forgotten about. It had tumbled to the seat and a few stitches had slipped off. She bowed her head to fish the stitches back onto the needle. “Tucker brought extra coffee. Go ahead and help yourself to the latte.”

“I will, bless him!” Mom settled into a chair with a smile on her face, but it could not surpass the worry in her eyes. They both knew they had a long wait ahead.

Sierra couldn’t explain why she felt something was missing—why someone was missing. She resisted the urge to glance over her shoulder, knowing full well that Tucker was long gone, and that was the way it should be.

“How are you doing, son?”

Tucker adjusted the phone on his shoulder and considered his dad’s question as he dropped the last of his clothes into his suitcase. His hotel windows offered a snowy, winter-wonderland view of downtown Denver, but the scenery wasn’t what he saw. It was Sierra sitting alone in the waiting room with her knitting in her lap and anguish on her beautiful face. He hadn’t liked walking away, but he didn’t belong there. Her family had that right. If he’d stayed it would have only gotten complicated.

“I’m packing right now. Catching a plane in a few hours.” He added his shaving kit to the mess, closed the lid and strong-armed the zipper closed.

“Great news. I’ll pick you up at the airport. Get more time with my son that way.” Dad sounded warm as always but there was something else layered in his words. Something that tugged at Tucker, bringing up all kinds of issues he didn’t want to face. He found life was easier staying on the surface. Or it had been until the accident. He’d been bucked off a bareback bronc the same way he had hundreds of times, but this landing had been different. He’d flown directly into the horse’s path and the animal hadn’t been able to avoid him.

Pain. That was the first thing he remembered before his heart had stopped beating. He’d been officially dead for two minutes and thirty-odd seconds until paramedics had gotten his ticker going again. Those two minutes had changed everything.

Including him.

“I’d like that, Dad.” When he had woken up in ICU, his father had been at his side. He knew he’d put his dad through a lot of fear and worry, and he was sorry for it. He’d been able to spend ample time at home on the family ranch recuperating, and he’d gotten used to seeing his father every day. He missed him now. “I’ll text you my flight information.”

“Great. Any word on how the little Baker boy is doing?” Caring about others, that was Frank Granger. Sincerity rang deep in his baritone as his light tone fell away, leaving only solemnness. “He was first on my morning’s list of prayers.”

“Mine, too.” He swallowed hard, ignoring the tug of worry deep in his gut. The image of the little kid, with one arm around Slayer and his eyes wide with excitement listening to rodeo stories, stuck with him. Lord, please watch over that boy.

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