

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUSAN MALLERY

Cowgirl Bride



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Аннотация

From #1 New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery, a fanfavorite story about love, returning home and second chances. Cowgirl Sierra Conroy doesn't need anyone. She's tough, independent and more than capable of holding her own on the ranch, despite all the grief the cowboys give her about being a woman. Sierra certainly doesn't need love. She gave up on that the day Dylan McLaine broke her heart and left town. Dylan knows he did wrong by Sierra, and he hasn't been able to forget her, even after all these years. And now that his marriage is over, he's bought a ranch in his hometown and he needs Sierra's help to run it. But will the woman whose heart he broke give him another chance?

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Praise for New York Times and USA TODAY Bestselling Author

Susan Mallery

“Mallery’s prose is luscious and provocative.”

—Publishers Weekly

“Susan Mallery’s gift for writing humor and tenderness make all her books true gems.”

—RT Book Reviews

“Romance novels don’t get much better than Mallery’s expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling.”

—Booklist

Cowgirl Bride Susan Mallery



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SUSAN MALLERY

is a New York Times bestselling author known for emotionally complex stories told with charm and wit. Susan has lived all over the United States, including a childhood in the suburbs of Los Angeles, graduate school in the hills of Pennsylvania and several years in Texas. These days, she makes her home in Seattle, Washington. She's there for the coffee, not the weather.

Find Susan online at www.SusanMallery.com. She's also very active on Facebook, Twitter and Goodreads, and has been known to invite her fans to help her name characters and brainstorm aspects of her books.

CHAPTER ONE

Sierra Conroy wasn't sure if it was the sharp cry or the flash of movement that caught her attention and she didn't much care. Before her mind finished registering what had happened, she'd already grabbed the rope hooked to her saddle and started racing toward the corral. The milling steers spelled trouble as clearly as a neon sign.

With an instinct honed by years spent on a ranch and in the rodeo, she dived into the melee of sharp horns and hooves. Someone called frantically from outside the corral, but she ignored that voice. Weaving between the annoyed animals, she searched until she saw something other than muscular shoulders, flashing tails and dust-covered hides. Her brief glimpse of jean-clad legs was enough to send her in that direction. She pushed her way through the corral.

"Steady," she said, speaking in a low voice designed to calm. Unfortunately whoever was in the pen with her wasn't equally at home with the restless steers. She felt the animals' growing tension.

Something flat and powerful butted her in the center of her back. She stumbled forward and bumped into a steer that bellowed in protest.

"Stay still!" Sierra called out. "I can't find you if you keep moving around."

More animals lowed in annoyance.

“Help me!” Terror laced the cry.

Sierra swore under breath. The steer next to her lowered its horned head to charge. She quickly ducked to the left, around another animal and saw a young boy being pushed and shoved by the unsettled herd.

“It’s all right,” she told him, reminding herself to smile, even as she felt the danger grow. “You’re going to be just fine.”

By God, that had better be true. She’d spent her entire life around big, ill-tempered animals and she refused to be trampled in a corral. The cowboys gave her enough grief about being a woman. When she received the bouquet at her brother’s wedding a few weeks back, the men had tormented her for weeks. She wouldn’t allow them the satisfaction of smirking at her funeral. Of course if she was dead would their attitudes really matter?

Before she could work that problem out, several of the steers shifted, giving her a clear path to the boy. She jogged to his side and wrapped her arms around him.

“Let’s get going, kid,” she said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw an arc of movement. Instinct again took over. She turned, shielding the child’s slight body with her own. Pain exploded against her upper arm, sending both her and the child staggering. She ignored the bone-jarring jolt, the sick feeling in her stomach and the instant wet heat that told her she was bleeding. Steers had kicked her before, although it had been a long time. She’d nearly forgotten how badly it hurt.

Of course the stitches wouldn't be much better. Why on earth had she thought this job would be fun?

"He kicked you," the kid told her.

"I figured that out already."

She continued to use her body as a shield while they made their way to the edge of the corral. One last steer lowered its head for a final charge. Sierra saw a man standing on the other side of the fence. Refusing to give in to the weakness creeping up her left arm, she bent over and grabbed the boy.

"Catch," she yelled and tossed him toward safety. At the last second possible, she spun on her heel and narrowly avoided a head-on collision with several hundred pounds of annoyed steak-on-the-hoof.

She staggered the last couple of feet and climbed out between wooden slats. Her legs gave way as soon as she reached safety. She leaned against a fence post and slid to the ground. When her butt hit packed earth, new blood trickled down her arm and she bit her tongue. The hell of it was, the morning wasn't even half over.

All she wanted to do was sit there until the aching stopped, but that wasn't an option. She had to check the cut on her arm. Maybe she wouldn't need stitches.

She nearly smiled at that one. There was too much blood for the wound to be small and shallow. One more scar for her collection.

She pulled her flannel shirt free of jeans and began

unbuttoning it. She drew it back over her shoulders and released her right arm first. The spring morning was chilly and goose bumps erupted on her tanned arms. Teeth clenched, she winced as she peeled the blood-soaked left sleeve down her arm. A shiver racked her. The thin cotton tank top she wore underneath might accommodate her modesty but it wasn't worth spit for warmth.

She didn't want to look. Looking at an injury always made it hurt a whole lot worse. Still she had to. Sierra forced herself to stare at her arm. The hoof-print formed a perfect half circle about four inches wide. The bleeding cut was on top, the area below was covered with blood. No doubt it was already swelling.

“Stitches and a bruise. Guess this just isn't my day.”

“Sierra, I don't know how to thank you. If you hadn't rescued Rory, he might have...” The male voice trailed off, then the man swore sharply. “You're hurt.”

She opened her mouth to make a sarcastic response. Sarcasm and pretending not to give a damn were often her only defenses in this male world she inhabited. But she couldn't speak. Not because of what he'd said, but because of the sound of the man's voice. Her mind didn't want to believe. She refused to remember. But her heart knew—and recognized. It thundered in her chest, then jumped to lodge in her throat.

She tilted her head back so she could stare up at the intruder, stare and convince herself it wasn't true. The morning sun was in her eyes. She had to raise her right hand to shield her eyes, vaguely aware she'd lost her hat in the corral. It would be

trampled now. She loved that hat. After five years it fit perfectly. Damn it, why'd she have to go and lose her best hat?

The distraction nearly worked. Worrying about the hat was almost enough not to notice the man's strength, his broad shoulders and the familiar set of his head. She could try to convince herself that Fate wasn't playing a cruel trick on her, that her past hadn't shown up to bite her on the butt with a nip that was a lot more startling and painful than the kick to her arm.

Then he knelt down to inspect her injury. He was nearly eye level and without the sun blinding her, there was no reason not to see him. To see him and remember.

"Dylan McLaine," she breathed, too stunned to feel his hands as he gently probed her arm. She hadn't seen him for a lifetime. If he hadn't been here right this minute, she might have been able to convince herself she'd forgotten all about him. But she hadn't.

Without closing her eyes, she remembered Dylan—loving Dylan had been the best part of who she was. When he'd left her—when he'd betrayed her and walked out of her life—she'd not only lost the man of her dreams, but she also lost herself.

"You're bleeding," he said, reaching for her flannel shirt. "I didn't see Rory fall into the pen, but when I heard the cry, I knew what had happened. Then you tore in after him. I knew if anyone could save him, you could. But I sure didn't want you to get hurt."

He took a knife from his jeans' pocket and notched the flannel, then tore it into strips. Two he folded into square pads and pressed against her arm to stop the bleeding, the rest he

wrapped tightly to secure the pads in place. It was only when he'd knotted the ends together and sat back on his heels that she realized two things. First, his hands were shaking and second, she'd stopped feeling the pain.

He looked at her. "How can I thank you?"

By growing old, she thought to herself. By being ugly and hard and not anything like the boy she remembered. Unfortunately he'd done none of those things. Oh, there were a few lines by his eyes and his lips didn't automatically turn up in the soul-stirring smile she remembered so well. He'd become a man in the ten years they'd been apart. Still handsome, still strong, still...Dylan. All the years and miles hadn't been enough to make her forget, or allow her to recover.

"Sierra?"

He spoke her name as if it still mattered. Almost wistfully. The way he'd spoken it a hundred—a thousand—times before. The pain returned with a nearly audible crash. She winced as her heart twisted painfully, still bruised from the loss she'd suffered all those years ago.

She deliberately closed her eyes. "Go away."

"I can't. Not until I thank you for saving my son."

The steer's kick had been like the brush of a feather when compared to the impact of Dylan's words. His son. She remembered the slight boy she'd hustled out of the corral. Forcing herself to face the inevitable, she opened her eyes and looked past the man still kneeling beside her. Her gaze settled on

the skinny kid in black jeans and an orange-and-white University of Texas sweatshirt.

His son. The boy looked to be about nine or ten, with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes. He was slight, with a sweet, earnest expression that made him impossible to hate. Not that she'd planned on hating him—he hadn't done anything wrong. The circumstances around his birth were unfortunate. At least Sierra had always thought so. But that was never the child's fault.

Dylan held out a hand to the boy. "Rory, come and say thank you to the lady who saved your life."

Sierra noticed Dylan's fingers trembled slightly. She wanted to think he was as affected by their reunion as she was, but that wasn't it at all. He was still recovering from the shock of Rory falling into the pen with the steers. The natural reaction of a parent when a beloved child was in mortal danger.

As Rory approached, she looked at him closely, trying to find some resemblance to the man in front of her. She didn't see much, although there was something familiar about the way his mouth tilted up at the corners and the shape of his eyes. But those characteristics didn't come from Dylan. They belonged to Claire—Rory's mother.

She hadn't thought more pain was possible, yet a new wave crashed over her, taking away rational thought and the ability to breathe. All she could do was feel. Not just the agony of this moment, but all that she'd suffered ten years ago. It was as if the time between had never passed. She remembered standing in

front of Dylan, listening in disbelief as he swore to her nothing had happened that night. That he and Claire had only been friends. That he still loved her—Sierra.

She'd wanted to believe him, had needed him to be speaking the truth, because anything else was too unthinkable. If Dylan had betrayed her, there was nowhere for her to run and hide. He was her world. So she'd believed because it was easier than facing the truth. But she couldn't keep believing. Not when the truth stood directly in front of her. Truth in the shape of a nine-year-old boy.

As Rory stopped at his side, Dylan placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Son, this is Sierra Conroy. You and I are going to have a talk about following instructions, but first I want you to thank her. She risked her life to save you, and got a bad cut in the process. That steer could have killed you both."

Rory didn't seem to appreciate the gravity of the situation. His face split into a broad grin as his eyes widened. "You're a real superhero! Just like on TV."

"A superhero?" Sierra asked, feeling more like roadkill than anything larger-than-life. "That's a lot nicer than a few other names I've been called."

"You made me fly."

"I tossed you out of the pen, kid. There's a difference."

The boy moved closer to her and grinned. "It felt like flying."

"I'll bet it did."

His gaze swept over her before settling on the makeshift

bandage around her arm. His humor faded. "I'm real sorry you got kicked. Does it hurt bad?"

When compared with the shock she was feeling? Hardly at all. But that wasn't what he was asking. "I'll recover," she said. "I've had much worse."

"Really? When? Do you have scars? Can I see them?"

"Rory." His father spoke in a stern voice. "You're missing the point, son."

Rory glanced at his dad and nodded. His chin lowered as he stared at the ground. "I'm real sorry for what happened, Miss Conroy. I didn't mean to fall in with the steers. I was just sorta watching them, but I couldn't see anything so I climbed on the fence to get a better look. Then I guess I slipped."

While she didn't blame the child for his part in destroying her life, she certainly hadn't expected to like him. Yet there was something appealing about Rory's big blue eyes and engaging smile. "Have you been on a ranch before?" she asked.

"Sure." He grinned. "Sorta. My dad just bought a ranch. We've got horses and steers, like this one. And the house is real big, but it's kinda dark inside."

A ranch? Sierra tried to imagine the ever-perfect Claire in a ranch setting. It was beyond her mental abilities. "A ranch can be a lot of fun," she told the boy. "But it can also be dangerous. If I hadn't come along, there's no telling what would have happened to you."

"My dad would have saved me," he said confidently.

Sierra didn't voice her private thoughts about what a civilized lawyer would do in a corral full of restless cattle. She didn't doubt that Dylan would have risked his life to save his son, but she doubted either of them would have survived the resulting chaos.

"And if your dad hadn't heard you calling?" she asked.

Rory thought about that for a second. His mouth twisted and he shoved his hands into his jeans' pockets. "Oh."

"Yeah. Oh. Do you think you could have made it out on your own?"

"No, ma'am."

"You think you weigh enough to push back those steers?"

"No, ma'am." His voice got a little softer and smaller.

"You think your parents would like finding you after you'd been trampled?"

This time he just shook his head.

"You think you're going to remember all this the next time you want to climb a fence you shouldn't be climbing?"

"Yes."

She could barely hear the word. "Good. You've learned an important lesson. I want you to know that even though it was stupid to climb the fence, you did the right thing when you called out for help. And when I was looking for you, you kept your head. You followed instructions very well. That made a difference. You're a smart boy. Good for you."

He grinned. "Yeah? Thanks, Miss Conroy."

"You can call me Sierra."

He looked at his father, who nodded at the unspoken question. Sierra felt her heart contract. For those few minutes, she'd been able to forget Dylan was right next to her. Now she was forced to acknowledge him, even if just to herself. She swore silently. Why couldn't she have forgotten all about him?

She didn't bother waiting for an answer. If there was one, she wasn't going to like it anyway. If only he would go away. But the way he was looking at her, as if seeing her was the bright spot in an otherwise dull day, that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Seemed as if she was going to have to be the one to end the conversation.

"I'd better get this looked at," she said, and motioned to her arm.

She braced her right hand on the fence behind her and started to push herself into a standing position. Dylan leaned forward and grasped her around her waist. "Let me help."

"I don't need—"

But it was too late. He was already helping. She found herself caught up against him, her breasts brushing his upper arm, her body close enough to absorb his heat. Memories flooded her. Memories of how good they'd been together, of how he'd always made her feel so alive just by being near her. She didn't want to remember any of that. She wanted to forget the past and pretend it had never happened. She wanted the scars to fade, too.

Even as she tried to pretend she wasn't affected, she inhaled the familiar scent of him. That combination of masculinity and

temptation. It wasn't cologne or even sweat. Just some chemical reaction in his skin, a faint, delicious essence that set her nervous system on fire. A shudder rippled through her from her scalp to her toes.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Do you feel faint?"

His impersonal concern was insulting. She wrenched free of his embrace and stepped to one side. "I'm fine. Couldn't be better. Now, if you'll excuse me—" She turned to leave.

"Sierra, wait. We have to talk."

Such simple words. They shouldn't have had any power over her, but they did. The power to wound and maul.

We have to talk. He'd said that to her all those years ago, right before he'd told her he was marrying someone else. She vaguely recalled an apology, something about him not wanting it to be like that. She couldn't remember exactly—the shock had been too great.

She wanted to scream at him. To tell him it was too late to talk about anything. He'd destroyed all her dreams when he'd left her. While she might not have recovered, she'd learned to get on with her life. Maybe that wasn't perfect, but it was all she had. Damn him. Damn them both.

Without wanting to, she glanced at him over her shoulder. He was dressed casually. Jeans, boots, a shirt. Just like most cowboys. But she knew the difference. His watch was expensive, as were his boots. Expensive as in they cost more than she'd made the previous month. The unfamiliar truck by the barn was new

and equally pricey. She might not be the naive young woman he'd left ten years ago, but all the growing up in the world wasn't going to strengthen the branches on her family tree. The Conroys were good people—good, poor, people. Dylan came from another world, one where ancestors mattered and class was a trait, not something one attended while in school.

From all appearances, he was the successful lawyer he'd always wanted to be. He'd achieved his dreams. Funny, he'd once told her that none of that would matter if he didn't have her. Guess he'd changed his mind.

“No,” she told him. “We don't have to talk. There's nothing left to say.”

CHAPTER TWO

Sierra Conroy had grown up but she was still beautiful enough to make a man wonder how he could survive without her. The years apart had allowed Dylan to forget that. Now, staring into her flashing hazel eyes, he realized that he might have forced himself to get on with his life and leave the past alone, but a part of him had never been able to let her go.

She stood tall and proud, a strong woman, facing him down, despite the shock of seeing him and the obvious pain from her injury. He wanted to believe her air of calm hid an inner turmoil. He wanted to believe that she'd never forgotten him, either. That she was as affected by this meeting. He had to believe that because one look at her was all it had taken for him. It was as if the ten years they'd been apart had never happened. Back then, he'd been willing to turn away from his family and their dreams for his future, just to be with Sierra. Here he was, ready and willing to do it again.

Only it wasn't going to be that simple. They'd both changed. There were complications, explanations, not to mention a nine-year-old boy between them. Dylan's feelings might not have changed, but both he and Sierra had. He knew she wasn't going to welcome him with open arms. He was lucky she hadn't already decked him.

"It's not what you think," he told her, wishing he had the

perfect words to make her understand. Ironically he was a lawyer and words were his stock-in-trade. Yet at this—possibly the most important moment of his life—he couldn't think of anything to say. Anything except the truth—that she was lovely with her dark blond hair pulled back into a braid. With her tanned skin, her full lips, her muscles and her work-roughened hands. She might not fit the traditional definition of womanhood, but she'd always epitomized femininity to him.

“I suppose you're not a successful lawyer,” she said contemptuously. “You're not here to flaunt all you've become.”

He eyed her arm. “Maybe I should take you to the hospital.”

She dismissed him with a scowl. “Yeah, right. Don't try to avoid the question.”

“I'm a lawyer,” he said. “I'm not here to flaunt anything. I'm here because I bought a ranch.”

That startled her. Her eyes widened slightly as she continued to glare at him. Her only concession to her injury was the gentle way she cradled her left arm in her right. “What do you mean? You bought a ranch around here?”

Dylan put his hand on his son's shoulder, then smiled down at the boy. “It's something we've talked about for a long time, right?”

Rory grinned. “Yup. We're gonna be cowboys. Just us guys.”

Sierra frowned. “Us guys?”

Dylan hesitated. He hadn't wanted to tell her this way. Not that there was a good time and place to discuss the state of his

marriage—make that his former marriage. Sierra had the most at stake in wishing his relationship with Claire failed, yet he didn't think she would be happy they'd divorced. In her mind, he'd abandoned her for another woman. Knowing her the way he did, he knew she would have expected him to at least have had the common decency to leave her for someone he would stay with for a lifetime.

“Claire and I are divorced,” he said quietly.

Sierra's frown faded. Her expression turned neutral. “I'm sorry,” she said, in a polite tone that was supposed to tell him the news had no meaning for her. Was that true? Had he come back for nothing?

Not nothing, he reminded himself. With or without Sierra, he wanted the ranch. It would be a place to which he could retreat. A place where his son could grow up surrounded by horses, cattle and wide-open spaces. What could be better?

“The ranch is going to be my new base of operations,” he told her.

“You'll practice law from there?” she asked.

“No. I'll have an office in town. But I am going to be involved with the ranch as well. The buildings are in good shape, but the herd needs work. I want to start a breeding program. That's why I'm here.”

Sierra shrugged. “I don't know what's for sale. You'll have to talk to the boss about that. I'm just one of the hired hands.”

“I know. Don't you ever want more than that?”

Her gaze turned icy again. “No one here is interested in your opinion of my life.” She glanced at Rory and closed her mouth. He knew that if his son hadn’t been standing there, listening to everything being said, she would have had a lot more to tell him.

“You’re good, Sierra. You’ve lived on ranches, you understand what has to be done. I’m not here to buy livestock. I need a foreman. I’d like to offer you that job.”

Something flickered in her hazel eyes. A flash of longing maybe—or was it regret? He couldn’t tell. Then the light faded and her lips curved into a bitter smile. “Gee, thanks. That would really be a move up for me. I’m a fair judge of livestock, but I’ve never been much of a judge when it came to men. Still, even those of us who are slow learners eventually catch on. Thanks, Dylan, but I’ll pass.”

“I know what you’re thinking but it’s not true,” he said quickly. “There were extenuating circumstances. There’s a lot you don’t know.”

“I know enough.” She raised her chin in a proud gesture he remembered so well. Deep in his chest, his heart tightened painfully. He would sell his soul to go back in time to change what had happened—but that wasn’t an option. And she didn’t know enough. But this wasn’t the time to convince her of that.

“Dad says you’re a barrel racer,” Rory said and grinned. “That you’re pretty good—for a girl.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I went from being a superhero to just a girl in the space of ten minutes. Talk about fickle. I wonder

where you get that trait from.”

“What’s fickle?” Rory asked.

Dylan ignored Sierra’s dig and answered his son. “Fickle means not being able to make up your mind about someone. Liking them and then not liking them.”

“I like you,” Rory said instantly to Sierra. “I think you’re great. Dad promised that I could learn how to ride, but I haven’t started lessons yet. Can you teach me?”

“Me?” Sierra shook her head. “Look, kid, I’ve got a lot of responsibilities around the ranch and not a whole lot of free time. I...”

Rory’s slight body seemed to shrink. His shoulders fell forward and his mouth drooped at the corners. “Yeah. Okay. You’re too busy. I understand.”

Dylan silently cursed his ex-wife. The woman had never worked a day in her life. She’d had a live-in housekeeper and a nanny, and she’d still managed to make her son believe she was too busy to deal with him. Rory had learned early on that his mother considered him a burden. Dylan continued to work hard to make the boy feel special and wanted, but he knew that nothing he would ever do could make up for the maternal rejection. The boy had translated that into an expectation of rejection from all women.

“I’ll teach you,” Dylan said and was rewarded with a slight smile.

“Really?”

He nodded. "Assuming I remember how. It's been a long time since I've been on a horse. I guess we can fall on our rears together."

Rory laughed at the thought.

Sierra rolled her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. You were never much of a horseman, Dylan. You'll hurt yourself and do Lord knows what to your son." She glanced at Rory. "All right, pip-squeak, I'll teach you to ride. But there's more to it than just taking a wild gallop. You're going to have to take care of your horse. That means feeding it and cleaning up after it. If you think a dog makes a mess in the backyard, wait until you see what a horse can do."

Rory grinned broadly. "I promise to do everything you say."

"You're going to, whether you promise or not. I'm a tough teacher, but you'll learn."

"When can we start?" Rory asked.

Sierra nodded to her arm. "Give me a couple of days to heal. I'll be in touch." Before Rory could ask, she crouched down so they were eye to eye. "I promise," she told the boy. "I won't forget."

Rory flung his arms around her. Sierra didn't respond to the impulsive hug and when the child released her, she stood up and cleared her throat.

"About the foreman job," Dylan began.

Sierra didn't bother saying goodbye. She spun on her heel and headed for the barn. He stared after her for a long moment,

wondering how long it was going to take to convince her that he wasn't one of the bad guys. What would happen if he couldn't?

"Is Sierra mad at you?" Rory asked.

"Not exactly," he answered, then ruffled the boy's hair. "So you'd rather she taught you to ride than your old man?"

"Yeah!" Rory grinned. "She's cool."

"That she is." He took his keys from his jeans pocket and handed them to his son. "Let's go."

Rory raced to the truck and carefully unlocked the passenger's door. Dylan followed more slowly, wondering what his next move should be. He could give Sierra a few days to get used to the idea of him being back in her life. After all, he had the advantage—she was going to be coming to his ranch to teach his son to ride. There were possibilities in that.

"Lost, McLaine?" a low male voice asked.

He turned toward the sound and squinted into the sunlight. The man moved out of the shadow of the barn and as he did, memories put a name to the face. Kirk Conroy—Sierra's older brother.

"Or are you just checking to see how the other half lives?" Conroy said, his tone as unwelcoming as his expression.

"Neither." Dylan glanced at the truck and saw Rory sitting on the front seat. He held a couple of plastic action figures in his hands and was obviously oblivious to Kirk's presence. "I wanted to talk to Sierra."

"She doesn't have anything to say to you."

“You don’t know that.”

Conroy moved a few steps closer, his posture challenging. They were about the same size. Talk about an even contest, Dylan thought, standing his ground.

“She didn’t need you all those years ago, and she doesn’t need you now.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Kirk’s eyes darkened. “Because I held her while she cried after you ran off and married Claire. You didn’t stay around long enough to watch her heart break, but I did.”

Dylan hated that he’d hurt her. That wasn’t supposed to have happened. “There are things she didn’t understand. I tried to explain...” His voice trailed off. Even to his own ears, his excuse sounded lame. At the time the right course had been so clear. In a choice between honor and love, he’d done what he’d thought was right. Now—Now he could only look back and wonder.

“But she never answered your letters, did she?” Conroy said with grim satisfaction.

His success in the courtroom was often based on a feeling in his gut. He’d learned to pay attention to what his body was trying to tell him. At this moment, it was practically screaming a question. So he asked it. “How did you know I sent her letters?”

Kirk shifted uncomfortably. It wasn’t much, but it was all Dylan needed. Several missing pieces clicked into place. He hadn’t believed it when she’d never written him back. Despite what he’d done, they’d loved each other. He thought he’d been

a fool for caring about her when she'd responded with silence. That wasn't it at all.

"She never got my letters," he said, knowing it was true. "You had no right to keep them from her."

"I had every right." Kirk pointed at him. "You promised to love her forever. You promised to stand against your family and marry her. You let her dream. But in the end, you turned your back on her and how she felt about you. You married another woman and never gave Sierra a second thought. That damn well gives me the right. She's my sister and I'm going to make sure you don't get a second chance to destroy her."

There were so many things he could tell the other man, Dylan thought to himself. But the truth wasn't always as simple as one might like. A thousand thoughts flooded his brain, a thousand images from the past. A thousand second guesses. In the end, he didn't even bother.

"You're wrong," he said quietly. "About me, about why I did what I did, and about me not giving her a second thought. I never stopped loving your sister."

Kirk's angry stance never wavered. "That must have made you a poor excuse for a husband."

"That's what my wife said the day she left. Goodbye, Kirk. Don't think you've seen the last of me because I'll be around. I'm going to do my damndest to explain everything to Sierra. I owe her that."

"The only thing you owe her is to stay the hell out of her life."

“You’re probably right. But I can’t.” Dylan headed for the car.

Kirk let him go without saying a word. As he turned the truck, he saw the other man still watching him. Would Kirk report the conversation to Sierra? What about the letters? Did he still have them? Would he ever tell his sister about them? Would Sierra believe Dylan if he told her about their existence?

Too many questions, he thought as they rolled onto the highway and headed back to their ranch.

“Dad?” Rory asked.

He glanced at his son. “What?”

“Is Sierra that lady? The one Mom always talked about?”

Dylan grimaced. Claire hadn’t cared who could hear her when she was in the mood to scream about something. He didn’t like to think about all the things his son had heard over the years.

“Yes,” he said. “She is.” Only Claire hadn’t referred to Sierra as a “lady.” Instead she’d been “that cowgirl bitch you can’t forget.”

“You still love her?” his son asked.

How like a child to cut to the heart of the matter. “I’m not sure,” he said, going for easy instead of honest.

“Well, I like her,” Rory announced and relaxed into his seat. “I think she’s cool.”

Dylan smiled, and for the first time since deciding to move to the ranch and look up Sierra, he thought there just might be hope for all of them.

CHAPTER THREE

Sierra kicked at the wooden fence post that was sunk deep in the ground, then tugged on the wires. The twisted metal was taut against her fingers. Although this portion of the fence was older, it was still in decent shape and wouldn't need replacement for a few years. She pulled a small notebook from her jacket pocket, removed her right glove and made a notation.

Riding the line was a time-honored tradition on a ranch. The boring job was necessary to insure the cattle stayed where they were supposed to. Sierra was always willing to take her turn, but she never volunteered for the duty unless she needed to think. Which was why she'd been out checking fences for the past two days.

In the space of a heartbeat, everything had changed. Her world, while not perfect, had been comfortable and familiar. Now she couldn't look around at the lush pastures and grazing cattle without another image superimposing itself on the scene. An image of a man's face. Dylan.

She'd actually reached the point where she could go weeks without thinking about him. When he'd first left, she'd barely been able to take a breath without recalling him. Then she'd been able to forget him for minutes at a time. Going an entire day without wondering about him had happened after a year or so. Gradually, though, time had healed...or so she'd thought.

Apparently the scar wasn't more than a superficial covering. One look into his brown eyes and she'd felt herself ripped open again.

She put the notebook away, pulled back on her glove, then walked to the next fence post and kicked at it. As she tugged on the wire, she felt a twinge in her left arm. Neat stitches held skin together. The swelling had finally started to go down, but she was going to carry a bruise for a few weeks. In addition to giving her time to think, riding the fence lines also gave her time to heal. She would rather take light duty than use a sick day. Sick days implied a weakness she didn't dare show around the ranch.

Sierra sighed softly. It was time to move on. She knew that now. She'd proved herself in a man's world and she was tired of it. Tired of having to be smarter, faster and better than everyone else, simply because she was a woman. She was tired of the teasing, the not-so-subtle joking, the occasional resentment. She wanted more.

Dylan had offered her a job as foreman. If anyone else had dangled that carrot in front of her, she would have snatched it up in a heartbeat. She had the skills and the experience. But working for him wasn't an option. So where did that leave her? The rodeo circuit had lost its appeal. She didn't want to travel anymore, she wanted roots. A place to call home. Someone to love.

Love. She pulled her borrowed hat off her head and turned it over in her hands. Except for Dylan, the emotion had always eluded her. There had been a few men she'd cared about. Good men, strong and caring. She'd tried to fall in love with

them, to feel the same bone-stirring heat, the same fluttering breathlessness, the same passion. It hadn't happened. Love didn't occur on demand. A voice deep inside whispered it might be because she was a one-man-woman. And Dylan was that man.

What if he was the only one she could love? Where did that leave her? She grimaced. She was so damn tough on the outside, but so scared on the inside.

A faint sound caught her attention. As she recognized the rumble of a truck engine, she glanced at her horse to make sure the animal was secure. She settled her hat back on her head and wondered what her boss wanted with her that couldn't wait until she returned to the barn. And then she knew. With a sureness that defied explanation, she knew the man driving to see her was Dylan.

The fence line was set at the top of a small rise. She wasn't that far from her horse. She could easily mount up and be halfway across the field before he cleared the hill. But instead of running, she stood her ground, telling herself that eventually seeing him would get easier. It would have to. It sure as hell couldn't get harder.

He was in the same four-wheel-drive truck he'd had a couple of days ago. As he stepped from the driver's side, she tried not to notice how his jeans emphasized his long legs. The denim was soft and worn, settling around his lower half with easy familiarity. A navy down vest hung open, exposing the gray-and-cream plaid flannel shirt below. All he needed was a hat and he could pass

for a cowboy. At least on the outside.

“Hello, Sierra.”

His voice was low and raked against her skin like fine sand. She shivered involuntarily. Her mouth went dry. “What do you want?” she asked, knowing she sounded rude and not caring.

One dark eyebrow raised slightly. “You haven’t called Rory. Did you change your mind about giving him riding lessons?”

She turned her attention to the fence post she’d already checked. Moving deliberately, she squatted down and examined the base. “I’ve been busy. But I haven’t forgotten. I’ll call tonight.”

“He’s really looking forward to it. If you’d rather not—”

She raised her head to glare at him. “I said I would teach him and I will. I don’t break my word.”

He didn’t even have the courtesy to flinch at her not-so-subtle accusation. “Good. He’s had enough disappointment recently.”

“I won’t add to that.” She slowly rose to her feet. A thousand questions circled through her mind. But more important than any of them was the idea that if she thought she could leave without looking as if she were running away, she would be on her horse in a hot second.

“He likes you,” Dylan told her, and took a step closer.

Sierra had to consciously not back up an equal amount. “He seems like a good kid.” She paused. “Are you and Claire really divorced?” She hated herself for asking, but she had to know.

He nodded.

Why? What had happened? But she only thought the

questions.

He read her mind. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

She shrugged, trying to convince both of them she didn't care. Dylan obviously took that as permission to speak.

"Claire and I never cared enough about each other," he said and shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. "I was willing to try and make the marriage work, but she got tired of me being in love with someone else."

Sierra's stomach convulsed once as the words sank in. The still-broken pieces of her heart quivered and she had to force herself to relax. It would be so easy to believe him, but she'd already been lied to once. "Not very original," she said. "I would have thought you'd have a better line."

"It's the truth."

"Lawyers are supposed to be more polished with their words. If you really want to make it in politics, you'd better get yourself a good speechwriter."

The second the words left her lips, she knew she'd made a mistake. Dylan's expression was triumphant. "You've been checking up on me," he said.

"Don't be stupid. We might all live on ranches around here, but at heart, this is a small town. Everyone knows everyone else's business." She damned her fair skin and hoped her tan was dark enough to prevent him from noticing the blush stealing up her cheeks. She hadn't been asking—exactly. She'd been listening. There was a difference. "You've always been an object

of interest.”

His mouth straightened. “How much did they talk when I ran off with Claire?”

Sierra swallowed. She didn’t want to recall that time. The whispered comments, the pitying stares, the endless days with nothing to do but get through the pain. “It was a long time ago. I don’t remember,” she lied. If only she’d been able to forget. If only she could forget now.

She turned to leave. It no longer mattered if he thought she was running away. Better to run and be whole than stay and risk more hurt.

“Sierra, wait.”

She hurried to her horse, but he caught up with her before she reached the animal. He grabbed her right arm in a grip that neither bruised nor offered any chance of escape.

“Did you think about my job offer?” he asked. “I was serious. I want you to be the foreman on my ranch.”

She lost herself in his face. In the handsome lines that had been etched into her brain. She noticed new lines fanning out by his dark eyes and the first few hints of gray at his temples. He’d grown up some, but she would have known him anywhere. This was the face she’d thought she would wake up to for the rest of her life. The face that had haunted her for ten years. There was no going back and the only way to go forward was to go on without him.

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