

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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The Cowboy's Easter Family Wish

Lois Richer



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Аннотация

His Unexpected Family After a heartbreaking tragedy, youth pastor Jesse Parker stopped believing he had anything to offer kids. Working with the boys at Wranglers Ranch, he's slowly beginning to trust himself. And when he meets widow Maddie McGregor and her young autistic son, his connection with little Noah and his pretty mom is instant. Maddie's heart is as guarded as his own, but as he spends time with the McGregors—helping Maddie in his Gran's quilt shop, caring for rescued puppies and bringing mother and son closer together—he rediscovers his purpose . . . including an Easter holiday surprise of renewed faith and love.

His Unexpected Family

After a heartbreaking tragedy, youth pastor Jesse Parker stopped believing he had anything to offer kids. Working with the boys at Wranglers Ranch, he's slowly beginning to trust himself. And when he meets widow Maddie McGregor and her young autistic son, his connection with little Noah and his pretty mom is instant. Maddie's heart is as guarded as his own, but as he spends time with the McGregors—helping Maddie in his gran's quilt shop, caring for rescued puppies, and bringing mother and son closer together—he rediscovers his purpose...including an Easter holiday surprise of renewed faith and love.

"I don't like to talk about my past," Jesse said.

"Me, neither." Maddie's focus rested on something beyond the laundry room. "I'm trying to concentrate on the future, on my new life."

"As a widow, you mean?" Jesse didn't quite understand why but Maddie had suddenly tensed, as if whatever was in her past was painful.

"More as a new person, an independent person who is strong enough to build a good life for herself and her son." She frowned. "I'm trying to forget my past but—sometimes it seems like there are things you'll never be able to forget. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes." He nodded. "In a way I suppose I'm trying to do the same."

"To forget the boy you feel you failed." Maddie said it gently,

as if she thought the words would hurt him, but it wasn't the words that hurt Jesse. It was knowing he'd failed Scott.

"You have such a way with my son," she said.

"He's a great kid." He felt a bubble of pleasure in having shared something so personal with Maddie.

LOIS RICHER loves traveling, swimming and quilting, but mostly she loves writing stories that show God's boundless love for His precious children. As she says, "His love never changes or gives up. It's always waiting for me. My stories feature imperfect characters learning that love doesn't mean attaining perfection. Love is about keeping on keeping on." You can contact Lois via email, loisricher@gmail.com, or on Facebook ([loisricherauthor](https://www.facebook.com/loisricherauthor)).

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Whatever your hands find to do, do it with all your might.

—Ecclesiastes 9:10a

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[Chapter One](#)

“That’s not Dad’s peanut butter.” Eight-year-old Noah looked shocked by his own blurted words. He quickly ducked his chin

into his chest.

“We could try it.” Fully aware of how much the busy Tucson grocery store aggravated her son’s autism, Maddie McGregor hesitantly suggested, “You might like this kind.”

“I like Dad’s kind. So do twenty million other people according to ads.” Noah always recited facts he’d memorized. “Dad’s rule was, buy the bestseller.” And he always quoted his father’s rules.

Noah’s hands were fluttering, a sign of his mounting agitation. Changing peanut butter brands right now wasn’t worth it. Maddie set the jar back on the shelf reluctantly. She was giving in to Noah’s rules. She’d vowed to stop doing that. But it had been a long day and giving in was easier than dealing with his upset behavior for the rest of the evening.

“Twenty million people could be wrong.” His expression said arguing was futile. “Okay, you choose.” She almost groaned when Noah selected the same oily brand his father had preferred. So much for her goal to break free of the past.

“You should give the other kind a try,” a male voice suggested. “It’s the one with the nut on top and if you’re going to eat nut butter, you need many nuts.”

“Many nuts eating nuts. Ha!” Noah’s burble of laughter erupted, then died away.

Maddie turned to find a pair of twinkling blue eyes studying her from an angular sun-tanned face atop a lean, lanky cowboy. Her first thought was how carefree he looked. Her second

turned to envy of his confident, relaxed stance. He looked so comfortable in his world.

When she noted a fan of tiny creases beside his eyes her envy died. He, like everyone else, no doubt had some story of past pain. She wondered half-absently what that story was before noticing the man's short cropped hair was the same shade of gold as a tropical sandy beach she'd once dreamed of visiting. And his shoulders—well, that broad width was the perfect place for a girl to rest her head.

Not this girl, of course, but—Maddie's cheeks burned as she visualized her late husband Liam's berating if he knew her shameful thoughts.

Forget him. You're breaking free of the past, remember?

But how to do that when her self-confidence was nil?

"I'm a peanut butter expert, ma'am." The stranger's smile coaxed her to respond to his joke. "Trust me, that brand tastes way better than the one the boy and twenty million others mistakenly prefer."

"Noah." Maddie's heart winced when her son's brown eyes flickered to the man, then skittered away, his face closing into its usual disinterested mask.

"Sorry?" The peanut butter expert arched an eyebrow.

"His name is Noah." Maddie hoped the stranger wouldn't comment on her son's now swaying body.

"Noah—like the guy with the ark," the man remarked. Something in his teasing tone caught Noah's attention, Maddie

noticed. “You have lots of animals?” he continued.

“A dog. Her name is Cocoa.” The swift response surprised Maddie.

“Why Cocoa?” The man looked interested, not merely polite.

“Cause she’s a chocolate lab,” Noah clarified. “Dogs should be named by their features. It’s not a rule but—”

“It’s a good idea,” the stranger finished with a nod.

“Yeah.” Noah’s eyes widened with surprise at his agreement.

Maddie stared at her child. Noah didn’t talk or interact with strangers. Not ever.

“Chocolate labs are the best.” The man thrust out his hand. “I’m Jesse Parker.”

Though Noah hesitated, he couldn’t ignore the gesture. His father had drummed politeness into him, one of his many unbreakable rules. Sure enough, Noah finally thrust out his small hand.

“Glad to meet, you, Noah, owner of Cocoa.” Jesse’s blue gaze slid to her. “And your lovely mother is?”

“Maddie McGregor.” She liked the way Jesse included her.

“Maddie McGregor.” He said it slowly, his forehead furrowed as if he was reaching for a stray thought. Then those blue eyes widened. “Not the amazingly talented quilter named Maddie McGregor who works for my grandmother at Quilt Essentials?”

Amazing? Talented? No one had ever called her that before.

“Grandmother—?” Maddie tried to put it together while distracted by his good looks. “Oh.” Suddenly it made sense.

“You’re Emma’s grandson.”

“The best one of the bunch.” He preened, then laughed. “You look shocked.”

“No, I—that is, I wasn’t expecting...” Thrown by his mischievous wink, Maddie gulped.

“Ninety-five percent of all children think their grandparents love them the best,” said Noah, who didn’t have any grandparents.

“In my case it’s true.” Jesse grinned.

“Emma always speaks of you as if you’re four,” Maddie blurted. Her cheeks burned when Jesse’s hoot of amusement rippled to the ceiling. She almost checked over one shoulder before correcting the impulse.

It’s been more than a year since Liam’s death. He’s gone. You’re free now. Free.

“I guess I act that age sometimes,” Jesse joked, and laughed again.

All down the grocery store aisle, heads turned to study him, and Maddie knew why. His laugh revealed the same zest for life that his grandmother possessed, the kind that beckoned you to join in. Maddie was pretty sure Jesse would be fun to be around.

Not that she was looking for fun. She was too old, too world-weary, too responsible for that kind of girlish silliness. Still, Jesse intrigued her.

“We have to go.” Noah frowned at her.

Maddie studied him in confusion. Noah never volunteered

conversation when strangers were present. Even more unusual, his agitated arm movements had ceased.

“What’s the rush?” Jesse asked.

“Ice cream.” While Noah pointed into the cart, Maddie wondered why her son was apparently unruffled when speaking to this stranger. But it didn’t matter. Better to leave now, before something else upset Noah. Because something always did.

“Nice to meet you, Jesse. Thanks for the advice.” In an act of defiance, she grabbed the jar of peanut butter Jesse had recommended and put it in her cart. Baby steps to independence, she thought defiantly.

“Uh, Maddie?” Jesse’s amused voice stopped her in her tracks. She couldn’t help contrasting his tone with a memory of Liam’s beguiling-when-it-wanted-to-be voice that could also cut like a sword.

Immediately, her tension returned. Schooling her face into impassivity, she glanced at Jesse. “Yes?”

“I’ve been trying to reach my grandmother by phone with no success.” His sincere friendliness chased away her tension. “I’ve stopped by her house a couple of times, but she doesn’t answer.”

“No, she wouldn’t.” Maddie almost groaned as Noah mumbled statistics about meeting strangers. Hopefully, Jesse hadn’t noticed her discomfiture.

“Why wouldn’t Gran answer?” Even Jesse’s frown didn’t spoil his good looks.

“She’s not home.” Noah’s quick response surprised Maddie.

“Where is she?” Jesse glanced from him to her.

“Away.” Noah’s vacant stare returned, but his hands stayed by his sides, calm for now.

“Emma’s at a women’s retreat in the mountains of New Mexico.” Maddie was puzzled by Noah’s seeming tranquility. Prolonged grocery store visits usually upset him.

“She likes it there.” Though Noah appeared inattentive, he was obviously keeping track of the conversation.

“Emma goes every January,” Maddie clarified. “She’s due back tomorrow, but you can’t reach her cell because she always shuts it off for the retreat.”

“I forgot about her yearly retreat.” Jesse looked so disappointed Maddie felt a twinge of pity when he added, “I wanted to surprise her, but I guess the surprise is on me.”

“She’s supposed to call me at work tomorrow morning.” Maddie couldn’t stop herself from offering to help. “Do you have a number I could give her to reach you?”

“No. I don’t have a cell phone.”

Maddie blinked. She’d thought Liam’s refusal to own a smartphone made them virtually the only ones left behind in this age of technology. Of course, now that she was a widow she could have bought her own, but hadn’t yet because of inner doubts about mastering it. Battling doubts had become an ongoing war for her mind.

“The FCC says to keep cell phones one inch from the body.” Noah’s speech ended as abruptly as it had begun.

“Oka-a-ay.” Jesse, eyes wide, dragged out the word, then glanced at Maddie. “I let my contract expire when I left Colorado. I’ve been on the move for several months, so I haven’t really needed a cell phone.”

The way his voice tightened when he said that made her wonder if he’d left Colorado under unhappy circumstances. Funny, Emma hadn’t mentioned anything.

“Well, when I see your grandmother I won’t tell her you’re in town, so you can still surprise her,” Maddie promised.

“Scientific studies say unexpected pleasure is more rewarding. Emma will probably like your surprise.” Noah frowned at Maddie. “Ice cream?”

“Yes, we’re leaving.” She laid her arm protectively across his shoulders, expecting him to jerk away, and not caring. Her action was meant as a motherly defence against Jesse’s searching scrutiny of her child. She hated when people gawked at Noah, then labeled him weird.

“Nice to meet you, Noah and Maddie,” Jesse said.

Nice? Maddie almost laughed at the pale, insipid little word that didn’t describe this encounter at all.

“Bye, Jesse.” Maddie walked with Noah toward the cashier while sorting through what she’d learned about him during her three-year tenure at Quilt Essentials.

Details were scant. Though Emma constantly raved about Jesse; how loving and generous he was, how good-natured his big heart, how his love for God embraced everyone he met, the

one thing she hadn't mentioned was Jesse's good looks. But then Emma was all about a person's heart, not their looks. Perhaps that's why Emma had never asked Maddie about the puckered red scar that ran from her left earlobe down her neck, the scar that made her so self-conscious.

Emma's friendship had been the lifeline Maddie had clung to—that and her own prayers that God would help her survive her marriage. Emma's quilt shop was a refuge where Maddie could bury her unhappiness in the comforting textures and glorious colors of fabrics, and let her inner soul come alive in a quilt. That very first day, Quilt Essentials had become Maddie's sanctuary and Emma the best friend she'd ever had.

Now Maddie pulled out her credit card to pay for her purchases, savoring thoughts of a relaxing evening ahead. Her hobby ranch on the outskirts of Tucson was mostly cactus and desert, but the charming, newly renovated house was all hers, the place where she could be and do what she wanted. And what Maddie wanted was to make Broken Arrow Ranch into the kind of home where Noah could enjoy a happy, carefree childhood while she taught herself to be strong and confident.

So far Maddie wasn't succeeding at either. No matter how she prayed, she couldn't shed the memory of Liam's voice constantly berating her. As for independence—well, learning to stand on your own two feet after a lifetime of having someone tell you what to do was a lot harder than she'd imagined. But she couldn't, wouldn't give up, though Noah resisted every change she tried

to make.

Some days Maddie almost lost hope that she would ever feel worthy of God's love, that Noah would make friends, relax and have fun like an ordinary kid. But she didn't often pray about it anymore, because she figured Liam was right; God probably wouldn't answer the prayers of someone as unimportant as Maddie McGregor.

They were storing their groceries in the trunk of Maddie's red SUV when Noah said, "Tomorrow's Martin Luther King Day lunch. I hafta bring food to school."

"Why didn't you tell me while we were in the store?" Maddie masked her exasperation.

"Forgot." Noah shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Ninety-nine percent of the other kids will bring stuff."

"I'm sure your teacher expects one hundred percent participation." She closed the trunk with a sigh. "Come on. Let's go find something."

"You want to talk to that guy again." Noah's lecture tone reminded her of Liam. "Sometimes strangers form lasting relationships after their first meeting."

"Lasting relation—what?" Maddie gaped at him.

"Dad would be mad that you like Jesse." Noah's dark-eyed gaze met and held hers.

"Honey, your father is gone." Where did he get these statistics?

"He'd hate Jesse." Noah kicked a pebble on the pavement.

“Dad never liked his kind.”

“What kind?” Maddie asked. The happy kind? The kind of person who doesn’t automatically find fault? “Jesse seems nice. And he’s Emma’s grandson,” she reminded Noah.

“Emma’s nice. But Dad wouldn’t like Jesse.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But that’s no reason for you to dislike him.” Maddie refused to pursue this. They both needed a break from the past. “Let’s quickly get whatever you need so we can get home before the frozen stuff melts.” As they walked across the lot and in through the automatic doors, she asked, “You didn’t get a note from your teacher?”

“Lost it.” He wouldn’t look at her.

“Noah,” Maddie chided, then let it go. He was always ultra responsible. Maybe losing the note was his way of avoiding the interaction of lunch. He wasn’t exactly the social type. “What exactly did your teacher say?”

“Memorize six lines of Mr. King’s speech and bring a food treat that will remind others of it,” Noah recited in a high-pitched, singsong tone.

Maddie hid her smile. His imitation of his teacher, Mrs. Perkins, was uncanny. “Have you memorized a portion of the speech?”

“The ‘I have a dream’ part.” Noah’s chest swelled as he precisely delivered the beginning lines of the famous speech. Then his pride visibly deflated. “I don’t know any food to go with that.”

“I do.” Jesse stood nearby, his wonderful smile flashing. “Sorry, didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but those lines always remind me of Gran’s I Have a Dream snack.”

“What’s an I Have a Dream snack?” Noah asked, seemingly interested.

“It’s pretty easy, Ark Man.” Jesse grinned, and to Maddie’s surprise, Noah didn’t decri the nickname.

“Ark Man?” She wrinkled her nose.

“Like Noah in the Bible, Mom. ’Cause I have Cocoa. An’ there’s a roadrunner that goes past our place, too,” he told Jesse with an eagerness she hadn’t seen—maybe ever? “An’ sometimes coyotes howl. An’ Mom feeds hummingbirds.”

“Wow.” Jesse looked impressed.

“So I guess I kind of am Ark Man?” he said, obviously seeking confirmation.

“Absolutely.” Jesse held up his hand to high-five, and Noah matched it. Both of them wore goofy grins.

Maddie stared at her introverted kid. This change—because of Jesse?

“So, to make these treats you need big marshmallows and some caramels,” Jesse continued.

“I’ll find some.” Noah raced away before Maddie could stop him.

“I’m sorry. I’m interfering without even asking you,” Jesse said after a quick glance at her. “I’ll go get him.”

“Please don’t. It’s the first time Noah’s been that excited about

anything since...ever.” Without thinking, Maddie put her hand on Jesse’s arm to stop him, then jerked it away when her brain repeated Noah’s strangers-forming-a-relationship fact.

No relationship for her. Never going to get hurt again.

“I warn you. If this recipe of Emma’s involves baking, it will be a failure.”

“It will?” A puzzled look darkened his blue-eyed gaze. “But it’s simple.”

“Maybe, but I can’t do simple baking,” Maddie admitted. “Actually, I can’t do complicated either,” she added, eyes downcast in a rush of shame. “I’m not a good cook.”

“She’s not,” Noah agreed solemnly, having returned with a huge bag of marshmallows. “Ninety-nine point nine percent of her cooking burns.”

“Noah!” Maddie exclaimed in embarrassment.

“Fortunately, this recipe requires no cooking. Just melting.” Jesse glanced at the marshmallows, then raised an eyebrow at Noah. “Caramels?”

“Couldn’t find any.” Noah looked dejected. “I guess we can’t make the snacks.”

“You can always make I Have a Dream snacks, Ark Man. One hundred percent of the time.” Jesse’s firm tone had the strangest effect on Noah.

“Okay.” His boyish shoulders went back and his face got a determined look that Maddie had not seen before. “How?”

“We find caramels because they’re the best part. And we

need cream.” Jesse beckoned. “Come on, you and I will check it out. They have to have them somewhere. Every self-respecting grocery store carries caramels.”

“I didn’t know that.” Noah tucked the information away.

A bemused Maddie trailed behind the pair, accepting the pint of cream Jesse handed her as she worried about where this was going to lead. To disaster probably, and not only for Noah. Melting meant heat, which meant burning, which meant...

“Here we go. Crazy section to stock caramels in.” Jesse plopped two packages into Noah’s arms. “Let’s make sure we’ve got enough for seconds.”

“I’m not allowed seconds of sweets. It’s a rule.” The non-challenging way Noah said that made Maddie wince. What normal eight-year-old didn’t automatically reach for seconds when candy was involved?

Just another thing she planned to change. Help Noah shed his stringent list of rules and become a regular kid. Check.

“Let’s take three.” She snatched another bag of caramels from the shelf. “Just in case they turn out okay.”

Which they won’t. She repressed the memory of that scoffing voice.

“I like your spunk, mother of Ark Man.” Jesse grinned at her. “We need dry chow mein noodles, too.” He laughed at their surprised expressions. “You’ll see. It’s delicious.”

With noodles in hand, Maddie paid for their loot then led the way out of the store, wondering if sharing a sweet snack with his

classmates would finally gain Noah acceptance from the other kids. He'd been an outcast for so long, mostly because of Liam's rules.

After her husband's death Maddie had blown a good part of her budget to change Noah's world. She'd located a private school that specialized in his issues and whose uniforms didn't make him look weird. She had his home haircut professionally restyled and enrolled him in a swimming class because he seemed to excel at that one sport. Yet despite all that, Noah still clung to his father's rules, which frustrated Maddie no end.

"Now you have everything you need, Ark Man. You and your mom can melt the caramels with a little cream, dip in the marshmallows, then roll them in the noodles. My job is done, so I'll be on my way. See you." Jesse waved and turned away.

He thought she could do this on her own?

"Wait," Maddie called out in panic. "Could you—uh, come to the house and show us exactly how to make them? Please? I'd ask Emma, but she's away."

She sounded desperate. Well, she was!

But she was asking for Noah's sake, because she wanted him to know what it was like to be the one to bring a special treat, to be in the limelight in a good way. Just once she wanted Noah to be envied by other kids instead of being mocked.

And maybe you're asking because you like the way Jesse didn't make fun of you for not being able to cook.

Her son frowned in confusion. "Mom?" he whispered.

“Stranger rule?”

Liam’s rules had taught Noah fear, and Maddie saw it now in his brown eyes. She was usually wary of strangers, too. But funnily enough, not with Jesse.

Why was that?

“Um, maybe I shouldn’t go to your place,” Jesse said, his gaze on Noah. “I could just—”

“Please come,” she invited, discounting her inhibitions. “I’d really like to make this treat.”

“I guess, if you’re sure?” After a moment’s pause Jesse added, “Since Gran’s away I haven’t got anything special on tonight. Maybe after we’re finished I could use your phone to call Wranglers Ranch about a job?”

“Sure. Tanner Johns owns Wranglers. His wife, Sophie, is a friend of mine. Actually, we’re neighbors.” Maddie stashed the second set of groceries in her vehicle. “If you help us, I’ll put in a good word for you in exchange.”

Maybe she wasn’t being totally straightforward by not telling Jesse that his grandmother was an ardent supporter of Wranglers Ranch and its outreach mission for troubled kids, or that Emma’s referral would probably be far more valuable than hers. But Maddie needed Jesse’s help. For Noah. So she waited on pins and needles.

“Okay, it’s a deal.” Jesse motioned to a battered brown half-ton truck that sat at the far end of the parking lot. “That’s mine. How far is your place?”

“About ten minutes outside the city. We live on Broken Arrow Ranch. You can follow us there.” Maddie waited with bated breath until he nodded. As he walked away she was surprised to see him clap a black Stetson on his head. Where had that come from?

You were too busy gawking at his hunky face to notice his hat.

“I guess Jesse’s nice. But Dad’s rule...” Noah’s confused voice died away.

“Jesse is Emma’s grandson. He’s like a friend.” She was doing this for Noah. She’d do anything to help him.

You’re making another mistake, Madelyn.

That voice killed the confidence she’d had in her hasty invitation, until she remembered her last talk with her boss.

Maddie, you went from being a child to being a wife and then a mom. Now you need to take the time to figure out who Maddie is. Not Maddie, Liam’s wife, or Maddie, Noah’s Mom, but Maddie, the beloved child of God. The first step is to learn to trust your Heavenly Father.

Okay then. She’d take this step, and maybe if she trusted God enough, He’d show her the next one, the step that would help Noah heal.

“Jesse calls me Ark Man,” Noah mused aloud.

“Is that okay?” she asked.

“I guess.” A tiny smile curved his lips. “I never had a nickname before.”

Because Liam hadn’t allowed them.

“It makes you feel kind of special,” Noah said thoughtfully.

Maddie pulled into her yard with a sense of wonder. Because of Jesse, her son the rule-keeper was changing. Was this the beginning of the breakthrough she’d been praying for?

What else could happen?

* * *

Jesse was simply going to show Maddie and her kid how to make the treats his gran had taught him to make when he was Noah’s age.

He was not going to get involved. So what could happen?

As he climbed out of his truck his stomach issued a loud and angry protest at its empty state. He stomped his boots free of the dust to cover the rumblings. He’d been counting on one of Gran’s delicious meals to satiate his hunger. Clearly, that wasn’t going to happen, but maybe Maddie wouldn’t mind if he gobbled up a few of her treats.

Jesse could tell by the look on the kid’s face when Maddie invited him inside that Noah minded him being there. Obviously, he’d heard many warnings to be careful of strangers. Not a bad thing, Jesse decided.

“This is a beautiful spread.” He glanced around appreciatively. “The untouched desert is fascinating.”

“I think so, too.” Maddie looked surprised by his comment. “I often sit on the porch with my coffee in the morning and just enjoy it. I love the peace.”

Meaning she hadn’t had a lot of peace in her life? Curiosity

about this woman mushroomed as Jesse took the grocery bags from her.

“The mountains make a great backdrop,” Maddie said, as she unlocked the door and pushed it open. “Although coming from Colorado, you probably think ours are puny.”

“No such—oof.” Jesse struggled to keep his balance as a chocolate lab jumped up at him. “Pleased to meet you, Cocoa.” He chuckled as the dog licked his hands.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Down, Cocoa.” Maddie tugged at the animal’s collar, dragging the dog away from Jesse. “Take her outside, Noah.”

Jesse noted the boy’s frown as his glance moved from her face to his, his eyes dark and stormy.

“Now, please, son,” Maddie said.

After a moment Noah nodded and clipped the lead on the dog’s collar.

“Hang on tight, Ark Man,” Jesse advised, as he plopped the grocery bags on the counter. “That’s a strong animal you’re taking out of the ark.”

Noah almost cracked a smile as he half walked, half dragged Cocoa outside.

“She’s a bit of a handful for him, but I’m hoping they’ll soon get used to each other.” Maddie smiled at Jesse’s questioning look. “Cocoa was my Christmas gift to Noah.”

“Nice gift.” Her Christmas gift, not our gift, he noted. So where was the kid’s father?

“If you want to wash before we make the treats, the bathroom’s just down the hall,” Maddie offered.

“Thanks.” Jesse walked past her, noticing that aside from the caramels and marshmallows, there were no frivolous purchases. Fruit, vegetables, bread, frozen dinners, peanut butter and milk. The basics. No cookies, no chips, no junk food at all, except for the caramels and marshmallows. Poor Noah.

She pressed the answering machine and listened to Noah’s teacher while she unpacked and stored her groceries.

Jesse took his time scrubbing up. When he returned to the kitchen, Maddie was telling Noah to leave the dog outdoors. On the deck outside, Cocoa was busy chowing down. Every so often she gave a guttural woof, glanced around, then returned to eating.

“Cocoa likes it better out there than inside the ark.”

Jesse did a double take. Noah’s face looked blank, but a tiny smile twitched at the corner of his lips. He chuckled. The stiff-necked kid had actually made a joke.

“So how do we make these treats?” With an apron wrapped around her narrow waist, Maddie stood primly poised behind the breakfast bar, hands folded, waiting for directions.

Jesse got trapped admiring the way her chin-length black hair glistened like an ebony frame around her oval face with its huge green eyes. Her lashes, long and lush, helped accentuate the smooth angles and curves of her sculpted cheeks, complimented by a pert nose and full lips. Maddie wasn’t tall, yet when Noah was near she somehow seemed stronger, invincible.

Jesse also glimpsed in Noah's mother an innocence, a delicate fragility. For as long as he could remember he'd had this weird ability to see beneath the mask others presented. That proficiency now told him that Maddie had suffered, but somehow Jesse knew that though bent like a reed in the wind, she had not been broken by her suffering. Instead, the tentative way she smiled at him added to his hunch that hardship had left Maddie McGregor stronger, still genuine and sincere, uncorrupted.

Exactly the opposite of his own world-weariness.

"Is something wrong, Jesse?" Her considerate tone pulled him back from the cliff of his sad memories.

Who was Maddie McGregor?

"I shouldn't have pushed you to do this tonight. You've been traveling." She offered him a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure you're tired. Maybe it would be better—"

"I'm fine." He noticed Noah sitting on the other side of the breakfast bar, watching them with those dark see-all eyes. "Gonna help, Ark Man? It's for your class, isn't it?"

Silent, Noah slid off his stool and joined his mother.

"First we need a heavy saucepan half full of water," Jesse explained. "Once the water's hot we can set another smaller pan inside it to melt the caramels."

Without a word, Maddie produced a pair of saucepans, half-filled the larger one with water and set it to heat on the expansive gas range.

"Okay?" she asked, a nervous edge to her voice.

“Great.” Jesse smiled to reassure her. “Let’s start unwrapping those caramels and putting them in this smaller pan.”

“How many?” Noah deftly slid a candy out of its covering, but made no attempt to eat it.

“How many kids in your class?” Jesse hid his surprise when Noah said eleven. “Small class.”

“He attends a private school,” Maddie explained.

“Okay, so eleven kids, multiplied by at least three treats for each. Let’s make fifty.” Jesse grinned at their surprise. “One of these is never enough, you’ll see. Plus they are small. Oh. I forgot to ask if you have toothpicks.” He noticed Maddie’s forehead crease in a frown. “Something we could use as skewers?” he prodded.

“I don’t think so,” she murmured.

“Does that mean we can’t make them?” Noah looked worried.

“We can still make them, but it’s much easier if we have something we can poke through the marshmallow to dip into the melted caramels, and leave in so we can stand it up.” Jesse wasn’t sure why, but suddenly it seemed very important that he help this woman and her child make his gran’s treat. “I could run back into town—”

“Dad got sticks for my science project. There were some left.” Noah’s eagerness made Jesse smile.

“Honey, I have no idea where those might be.” Maddie’s cheeks grew pink. She did not look at her son. “When we moved here we had so much stuff and—”

“And you wanted to get rid of Dad’s stuff,” Noah’s harsh voice accused. “Waste not, want not. That was his rule.”

“Yes, it was.” Maddie’s voice dropped to a whisper.

Jesse hated the way her lovely face closed up, like a daisy when the sun went behind a cloud. He had to do something.

“Can you call your dad and ask him if he knows where they might be?” he suggested.

The room went utterly still.

“He’s dead.” Noah’s voice broke. He glared at his mother. “You hated his rules, but I don’t.” Then he raced from the room.

Jesse had vowed not to get personally involved in a kid’s life again, not after the fiasco in Colorado. Why hadn’t he stayed out of his grandmother’s favorite grocery store tonight? Why hadn’t he avoided this woman and her troubled kid, simply swallowed his impulse to help?

Most of all, what was he supposed to do now to stem the tears tumbling down Maddie’s white cheeks as she stared after Noah?

Lord, You know how I’ve failed others. You know I’ve vowed not to get involved again, to never again risk failing a child.

So, God, what am I doing here with this woman and her troubled son?

Chapter Two

Weeping in front of a stranger?

Liam would—Forget him!

“I’m sorry.” Maddie swiped a hand across her wet face. “Noah is still struggling to deal with his father’s death.”

“How long has it been?” Jesse asked quietly.

For the first time since she’d met him, Maddie tried to recall Emma’s words about her grandson. Why had he offered to help them, strangers he didn’t even know?

“Liam died of a heart attack just over a year ago.”

“A heart attack?”

She saw Jesse’s eyes flare with surprise and felt compelled to explain. “I’m twenty-seven. Liam was eighteen years older than me.”

“His death must have been very hard on both you and Noah,” Jesse said in the gentlest tone. “So after he died, you moved here?”

“We were renting a house that belonged to the church Liam pastored. We had to move because they needed the house for their new minister.” Maddie wasn’t about to admit just how eagerly she’d left that unhappy place. “Noah and I rented for a while, then moved to Broken Arrow Ranch last summer.”

“I see.” Jesse nodded. “That’s a lot of change for any kid to handle.”

She immediately bristled, then realized Jesse wasn’t criticizing, simply stating facts. And yet she still asked, “Do you think I was wrong to move here?”

“Are you kidding?” Jesse chuckled. “It was dusk when we drove up, so I didn’t get the full impact, but what I did glimpse of your spread was impressive. I doubt anyone would fault you for wanting to live here.”

“I love it,” she whispered, but she didn’t tell him it was because the ranch represented freedom. Maddie glanced out the window as she explained the rest of her story. “Broken Arrow belonged to an elderly couple. They’d just completed interior renovations when the husband got sick. When they decided to move closer to medical care, Emma and Tanner both suggested I buy this place.”

“Tanner—of Wranglers Ranch?” Jesse interjected.

“Yes. I think he and Sophie wanted to make sure they got a good neighbor. They helped us move here. But I’m not sure they’ve benefited much. I’ve had to call Tanner for help with a mouse—twice.” Maddie chuckled. “The upside for us is that Sophie’s a caterer. She often invites us over to try her new recipes and they are always delicious. I think I got the better deal when it comes to neighbors.”

“Ah.” His eyes twinkled with fun. “They get a good neighbor and you get good food. You’re a smart lady.”

“Not that smart.” Maddie frowned. “What do we do for skewers?”

“Why is making this so important to you?” Jesse asked curiously. “It’s just candy.”

She glanced at the doorway through which her son had disappeared a few moments earlier, then answered in a hushed tone. “It’s not just candy to me. It’s a chance for Noah.”

“To do what?” Jesse scanned the caramels and marshmallows. “This isn’t the stuff heroes are made of.”

“It could be.” Maddie wasn’t above begging when it was for

Noah. "Please, Jesse, show us how to make these treats."

She held her breath. Emma said Maddie was God's child. Surely He would help her convince Jesse to help them?

* * *

Jesse had never been able to turn down anyone who asked him for help, and despite his recent vow to remain uninvolved, he couldn't do it this time, either. Calling himself an idiot, he began unwrapping more candy, adding to the contents in the saucepan, which he noted was gleaming and without a scratch.

She was a mom with a kid of, what? Seven? Eight? But apparently she'd barely used these like-new saucepans.

Jesse glanced around. Come to think of it, the furniture looked brand-new, too. Nicely tailored, not fussy, definitely comfortable, with quilts scattered here and there. Precise, finely patterned quilts with detailed stitching... Everything looked unused.

Also, everything was in its place. There wasn't a speck of dust or a mess anywhere, no toy tossed here or a shirt discarded there. To Jesse, eldest of four rambunctious kids, this didn't look like the home of a dog and a young boy. It was too—restrained. As if it hadn't yet become home.

Two pictures hung on the wall. One was a very large portrait of Noah staring at a birthday cake with eight burning candles. The second was a smaller photo of him and Maddie standing by a flowering cactus. There were no snapshots or precious photos of the late husband and father. Questions multiplied inside Jesse's

head.

“What can we substitute for the skewers?” Maddie asked, drawing him from his introspection.

“Forks, I guess. You don’t have regular toothpicks? Because they would work,” he said, as he added a small dollop of cream to the melting candy.

“No, I’m pretty sure I don’t—oh, wait.” With a smile as big as Texas Maddie flung open a cabinet and lifted out a massive cellophane-covered basket. “This was a housewarming gift from your grandmother. I guess she thought we’d be camping out or something, because she put in a bunch of disposable things. Maybe there’s something we could use in here.”

She pawed her way through the crackling cellophane, pulling out items and discarding them on the stone countertop in her search for toothpicks.

“Well?” Jesse waited, content to watch this beautiful woman.

“Nothing.” Maddie’s tone deflated when she came to the bottom of the basket.

“These might work.” He selected and rotated a box.

“What are they?” She leaned across him to read the label. “Oh. Stir sticks.” She turned away, then stopped and turned back, eyes glowing as she took the package and tore it open. “Stir sticks!” she repeated, her grin wide as she held up a handful.

“Wooden ones, which are perfect, though I’m surprised my tasteful grandmother chose such lurid colors.” He plunged the tip of one purple-and-green-striped stick into a marshmallow and

grinned right back at her. “Hey, Ark Man,” he called. “We’re making the treats. You better come help us so you’ll be able to tell the other kids how to make ’em.”

Jesse hadn’t given a thought to calling Noah until he glanced at Maddie and suddenly realized he should have let her do that. He opened his mouth to apologize, but she stopped him with a tearful look.

“Thank you,” she whispered, just before her son appeared. “We found stir sticks for the I Have a Dream treats, Noah. Emma sent them in that basket of stuff.”

“Huh.” Noah watched Jesse, who drew his attention to the melting caramels. The boy spread the crisp noodles on a sheet of wax paper as directed, then mimicked Jesse’s action, dipping a skewered marshmallow into the melted candy, rolling it in the noodles and standing it in a glass to set.

“Wait,” Jesse ordered, when they’d made a total of three treats. Mother and son turned questioning gazes on him. “There’s no point in making any more unless they taste okay. Go ahead,” he urged Noah. “Do a taste test.”

Noah glanced at his mom, who nodded. With exaggerated slowness he lifted one of the sticks from the glass and tried to bite the caramel. Of course the marshmallow moved, escaping his teeth. Jesse couldn’t control his amusement, until Noah set the stick down, his face a wounded mask.

“This is what you looked like.” Jesse made a fool of himself trying to coax a laugh from Noah and his mother and finally

succeeded. “Now this is the proper way to eat them, or at least it’s how I’ve always eaten them.” He popped an entire marshmallow into his mouth, closed his eyes and chewed. “Mmm. I’d forgotten how good these were.” He savored the taste.

Maddie reached for the last one. She put it in her mouth hesitantly, but then her eyes widened as she chewed.

“Noah,” she said, wonder coloring her musical voice. “Taste it. They’re delicious.”

“Sweets are bad for you,” Noah recited. “A third of all children starting school have tooth decay.”

“It’s okay to have a treat now and then,” she told him.

Jesse could see how hard the boy was finding it to taste the candy. Those rules again. Someone had sure brainwashed him.

“Too many sweets are bad for you,” he agreed. “But you’re not going to have too many. Are you, Ark Man?”

After a moment, Noah shook his head, picked up his skewer and studied it with a critical eye. “I like triangles,” he said firmly. “They’re the best. These are circles.”

Jesse blinked. “Uh, I don’t know how to make them into triangles.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Maddie intervened with a smile. “Just try it, Noah,” she encouraged. “Circles are good, too. Think about apples and oranges.”

“I like triangles.” But he did slide the covered marshmallow into his mouth. The myriad of expressions that chased across his face was a delight Jesse was glad he was there to witness.

“So tell me, Ark Man, are circles okay?”

Still chewing, Noah nodded vigorously.

“And do you think three each will be enough for your classmates?”

He shook his head in a very firm no.

“Then let’s get busy,” Jesse urged.

They worked together in a relay. With delicate precision Noah speared the marshmallows, then handed the skewers to Jesse for dipping. He passed them on to Maddie to roll in the noodles. Halfway through they changed positions, so Maddie could dip and Noah could roll. And somewhere in the midst of the laughing and giggling and sneaky licks of a finger, Noah became an ordinary kid making a treat in the kitchen.

When Jesse glanced at Maddie he found her watching him, appreciation shining from the depths of her gorgeous green eyes. He couldn’t look away, but she did, quickly, as if she was embarrassed.

“We’ve used all the marshmallows, so I guess it’s time to clean up, and you need to get ready for bed.” Maddie mussed Noah’s too-perfect hair and pressed a kiss on his head. “How shall we keep these overnight, Jesse?”

“Just leave them. They’ll dry out and firm up a bit. Then you can lay them in a box or container for school tomorrow.” He was embarrassed by his stomach’s loud rumble.

“Didn’t you eat dinner?” Noah paused in his cleanup of the leftover noodle bits.

“I didn’t.” Jesse shrugged. “That’s why I went to the grocery store. It’s Gran’s favorite. When she wasn’t at home, I hoped I’d find her there and that maybe she’d have dinner with me when she was finished shopping. Or maybe make me dinner.” He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll get something to eat on my way back to my campsite.”

“You’re camping?” Noah’s bored look vanished, replaced by excitement.

“Ever since I left Colorado, Ark Man.”

“In a tent? With a campfire? And cookouts?” Awe filled Noah’s voice.

“All of the above,” Jesse agreed.

“Cool.” The word whooshed out of Noah as if he could only imagine such a life.

“It is fun, except when it rains or there are mosquitos. Thankfully, the desert has little of either right now.” Jesse turned to Maddie. “I’ve taken some time away from work to see this country,” he explained.

“What is your work?” she asked.

“I’m—I was a youth pastor.” He could almost feel her draw back when he said the word pastor. “I, ah, needed a break.”

“I see.” Maddie’s face tightened into a mask. She abruptly turned her focus on Noah. “Get ready for bed, please.”

“Eight o’clock is bedtime,” Noah explained with a sigh. “It’s the rule.” He hesitated. “Will I see you again, Jesse?”

“I hope so, Ark Man. I intend to apply for a job at Wranglers

Ranch. That's right next door, your mom says." He smiled at the boy, but Noah was deep in thought.

"You're a minister," he said quietly, then glanced up. "Like my dad was?"

"Not anymore." Jesse felt funny saying that, as if God had somehow rescinded the call He'd made on his life so many years ago. "For now I'm going to try being a ranch hand." Until I figure out what God's doing and what I'm supposed to do.

"My dad said that when you work for God you can't quit," Noah said firmly. "He said that God wouldn't let him quit. He said it was a pastor's rule."

"For him, sweetie. It was a rule for him." Maddie nudged his thin shoulder. "Now thank Jesse for showing us how to make the treats."

Noah obediently thanked him, but it was clear that though he left without further protest, the question of Jesse's unemployment was not settled.

"I should get going, too," he said.

"Please stay and share a cup of tea, maybe a sandwich?" Maddie stood at the counter, hands knotted as if she was nervous. Her black cap of hair gleamed under the lights. "I'm no cook, but I owe you at least that much."

"You don't owe me anything. But I wouldn't say no to a cup of tea. Or a sandwich," he added, when his stomach complained again.

"I can do a sandwich." Maddie's face looked like the sun had

come out, so brilliant was her smile. She put the kettle on, then pulled open the fridge. “What would you like?”

“Anything is fine. Thank you.” He hoped she’d offer a thick slice of roast beef with hot mustard on fresh French bread. Or maybe—

“Is peanut butter okay?” Maddie stood in front of her fridge, clutching an almost empty jar of peanut butter, the same wimpy brand Noah preferred. “I could mix it with honey,” she offered.

“Great.” Jesse sat at the counter and accepted the sandwich when she served it, biting into it with relish, smiling and nodding as he chewed. “It’s good.”

“I should have made you something nice. I wish I could. You deserve it.” She sat one stool away from him, elbows propped on the counter, inhaling the steam from her tea. “Here I have this designer kitchen that most women dream of, and I’m a useless cook.”

That sounded like something someone had called her.

“Why don’t you take cooking lessons?” he asked, after swallowing the sticky mass. “Gran made my mom take them.”

“Really?” Maddie looked as if she’d never heard of such a thing.

“Sure. When my parents lived here there was a cooking school called Alberto’s Mama. That’s where my mom went to learn to cook before she had me.” He grinned. “Gran insisted it was a necessity and my dad was happy to pay when he started tasting Alberto’s Mama’s recipes. Was your husband a cook?”

He pretended to ask out of idle curiosity.

Immediately, Maddie went tense. Her fingers tightened around her cup and her cheeks lost the delightful pink that had bloomed there. “Gourmet,” she murmured.

And that only made you feel worse.

Jesse’s heart hurt at the wounded look on her face. “I’m sure you have talents in other areas.”

She laughed, head thrown back, throat bare. It was the way Maddie should always laugh—full-bodied and freely expressing her emotions, Jesse thought. Not like that timid, fearful mouse he’d glimpsed a few moments ago.

“I don’t have many talents, but I can make a pretty good quilt,” she agreed with a cheeky grin, then quickly sobered. “Though some say that’s a pointless and dying art.”

“Since when is giving comfort pointless?” Jesse was angry that someone had so cruelly disparaged her gift. “When I was a kid I used to go with Gran to take her quilts to the cancer ward and to the homeless shelters. People loved her gifts because the quilts made them feel special and cherished, as if they mattered. That feeling is an amazing gift to give someone. It takes real talent. Cooking is just following directions.”

Jesse hadn’t meant to sound off, but when he noticed Maddie’s spine straighten he was glad he had, now certain of his original assessment that someone hadn’t properly valued this woman. He got caught up in speculating who that was, but his thoughts were interrupted by a call from the bedroom.

“Excuse me.” Maddie disappeared into Noah’s room with a smile, but when she emerged moments later her green eyes swirled with uneasiness.

“Everything okay with the Ark Man?” he asked.

“Noah’s fine.” Maddie frowned. “Why do you call him that?”

“Ark Man?” He shrugged. “Noah seems all about formalism, rules, that kind of thing. I’ve found—I used to find,” he corrected, “—that sometimes a nickname helps break through the mask most overly responsible kids wear. I can stop if you want.”

“Please don’t.” There was something about Maddie now—a tightness that echoed the tension on her pretty face. “Noah likes that nickname.”

Jesse couldn’t define the vibe he was getting, but that openness he’d so admired about her earlier had disappeared. He had the impression it had to do with him having been a minister—like her husband.

“Noah would like to speak to you for a minute.”

“Sure.” He walked toward the room Maddie indicated, and stepped inside, surprised by the plain simplicity of it. No superhero posters, no toys scattered around, no video games or computer. No distractions. Just one small bedside photo of a man with dark hair graying at the temples and a severe-looking face. Noah’s father, Jesse guessed. “Hey. Ready for bed, huh?”

“Yes.” Noah lay tucked in his bed, covered to his chin in a gorgeous gray quilt with puffy, silver-white clouds delicately

dotting the surface. Somehow Jesse knew Maddie had made it. “Thank you for helping my mom and me make the treats, Jesse.”

“You’re very welcome. I hope you enjoy them.” Jesse could tell the boy wanted to ask something, so even though Maddie stood behind him, ready to escort him out, he waited.

“Sometime...” Noah paused, glanced at his mother, then let the words spill out. “If it’s not too much trouble, could you maybe show me your tent and campfire and—everything?”

“Sure.” There was such a longing in the boy’s request that Jesse couldn’t let it be. “We’ll make s’mores,” he promised.

“Some mores?” Noah frowned. “What’s that?”

“S’mores.” He grinned. “Did you like the I Have a Dream snacks?”

“Oh, yes.” Noah licked his lips with relish.

“Then you’ll like s’mores,” Jesse promised with a chuckle. “After I talk to the people at Wranglers and find out if I can get a job, I’ll check with your mom and we’ll set up a time for you to visit my campsite. Okay?”

“Thank you very much.” Noah’s eyes shone.

“You’re welcome. Good night, Ark Man.”

“Good night, PBX.” A sly smile lit his face.

“Pardon?” Jesse couldn’t figure out what the letters meant, but the boy wore a smug look. “What’s a PBX?”

“Peanut butter expert.” Noah grinned when Jesse laughed. Then he suddenly looked worried. “Is it okay?”

“It’s an excellent nickname. Thank you, Ark Man. Sleep well.”

Noah nodded, snuggled his head against the pillow and closed his eyes.

Jesse followed Maddie to the living room and sat in the chair she indicated, still chuckling.

“PBX. What a kid.” He caught her studying him. “By the way, if his quilt is an example of what you can create with mere fabric,” he said, “I’m in awe. Forget learning to cook. Your work is spectacular.”

“Thank you.” She actually blushed at the compliment. “It couldn’t be bright and colorful, so I did the next best thing. Noah seems to like it.”

“Why couldn’t it be bright?” Jesse was curious about her response. “Are colors against Noah’s rules?”

“No.” She gave him a quick glance, then shifted her gaze to somewhere beyond his shoulder. “Noah is autistic. Too many bright colors or vivid patterns create heightened stimulation and that stresses him. So I tried to make his room calm but still attractive, a place where he can rest, concentrate, be at peace.”

“Looks to me like you succeeded. With him, too. He’s a great kid.”

“Thank you.” Maddie twiddled her fingers together, then looked directly at him. “I guess you know a lot about kids, having been a youth pastor.”

“I don’t know as much as I should,” Jesse said bitterly, his joy in Noah’s excitement evaporating. If he was going to hang with her son, Maddie deserved to know the truth. “One of the kids in

my group committed suicide and I'm to blame."

"Why?" Her soft question wasn't perfunctory. She leaned forward, her eyes wide with interest, as she waited for his response.

"Because I couldn't stop him." How it hurt to admit that.

"I don't understand." Maddie frowned. "Were you there at the time?"

"No. Scott was at home, in his room, when he took an overdose of pills." Jesse gave the details clearly and concisely, his guilt burgeoning with each word. "His parents found him in the morning, lifelessly clutching a note that said he was being bullied and wanted to make it stop." Waves of self-recrimination returned.

"Oh, no." Her whisper of empathy helped him continue.

"I was Scott's friend as well as his youth pastor. I saw him at least three times a week. I took him for a soda that very afternoon." He shook his head. "Why didn't I know? Why didn't I see something?"

"I'm so sorry, Jesse." Maddie's sympathy brought him back to the present.

"Thanks. I had to tell you."

"You did?" Her green gaze widened. "Why?"

"In case you don't want me to be around Noah." To his utter shock and dismay, Maddie began to laugh. "What's so funny?"

"You." She shook her head. "Jesse, do you have any idea how I've longed for my son to break free of his autism long enough

to find joy in kid things?”

He shook his head.

“Only since he was diagnosed, when he was three,” she told him, her tone fierce. “Tonight, for the first time in eons, I watched Noah become engaged and interested, really interested, in something.”

“It was just candy.”

“Just candy?” Maddie chuckled. “Noah doesn’t eat candy. Ever. He only talks about candy, repeatedly reciting his father’s rule about its unhealthiness. Tonight, somehow, you got him to not only make candy but eat it and enjoy it. That’s huge.”

“I’m glad if he did.” Jesse grinned. “Even if it wasn’t triangles.”

“He has a thing about triangles. But that isn’t all you did.” Maddie’s lashes were suddenly wet as a tear rolled down her cheek. When she looked at him, deep love for her precious boy lay vulnerably revealed. “You talked to him, not at him. You treated him as if he’s normal kid.”

“Well, he is. Isn’t he?” Jesse frowned at her.

“Noah has...issues other kids don’t have. He’s very reclusive. He doesn’t interact easily and yet tonight you discovered interests in him that I never even imagined. Nicknames. Camping.” She shook her head, a rueful look on her face. “How could I not have known Noah was interested in camping? Liam was right. Sometimes I am just plain dumb.”

“Liam being...?” Jesse had to ask, though he was pretty sure

he already knew who this denigrating person was.

“Liam was my husband. That’s his picture by Noah’s bed.” A rueful smile lifted the edges of her lips. “You probably wonder how I could have married a man so much older than me.”

That question along with a hundred more about this amazing woman had burned through his brain, but Jesse remained silent, letting her speak on her own terms.

“Everyone wants to know that and the answer is...” she paused, her face tightening “...escape. You told me about your past, so I’ll share some of mine.” She took a deep breath. “My father was abusive when he got drunk. I spent my childhood and youth avoiding him, hiding out at a friend’s, keeping his secret, trying to finish my studies so I could graduate and leave.”

“But you should have—”

“Told someone?” A half smile that held no mirth lifted her lips. “I did once and paid for it dearly. I knew that if I told again, I would only get hurt that much more. I wasn’t that stupid,” she added, almost defiantly.

“So Liam came along,” Jesse murmured, knowing exactly where this was going.

“He stopped by initially to invite my father to his church, and then he just kept coming back. I could tell he was interested in me, but I never took it seriously. I didn’t know anything about men. I was so naive.” She looked embarrassed and...ashamed? “One day my dad came home in a foul mood. He’d lost his job and he was drunk. Very drunk. And I was his punching bag.”

Anger burned inside Jesse for the girl she'd been, alone, unprotected and unloved. But he held his tongue, letting her vent, because he'd learned the abused often needed to verbalize their pain.

"I endured as long as I could, but later, when he zonked out, I saw my chance and I ran away. I was huddled on a park bench when Liam found me. He bought me some new clothes to replace my torn ones, fed me and then he proposed." Again that unamused smile. "He was my way out and I grabbed at the chance."

"That was the night you got the scar." Jesse didn't need to see her nod or the way she lifted her hand to touch the puckered skin to know the truth. "I don't blame you for seizing the opportunity."

He hesitated. He'd vowed not to get personally involved again, but he couldn't just up and leave her like this, stuck in what sounded like a miserable past.

"It wasn't a good marriage," Maddie whispered, her voice forlorn. "I didn't know anything about being a wife, let alone a pastor's wife. I couldn't cook and the child I bore was what Liam called defective. My fault. I was a failure."

"How could Noah's autism possibly be your fault?" Jesse demanded. "And he is not defective," he hissed through clenched teeth.

"Thank you for saying that." She offered him the saddest of smiles. "To be fair, my husband was much older and not used to children. Noah had colic. He cried a lot and that got on Liam's

nerves. I guess that's why he stopped asking me to be involved in the church, and left me to tend our son. As Noah got older and other problems emerged, Liam decided the way to control Noah's outbursts was to instill in him a set of unbreakable rules."

"Ah," Jesse said, understanding. "Noah learned he could please his father if he obeyed all the rules."

"Exactly." Maddie grew thoughtful. "I'm not exactly sure why, but now Liam's gone and Noah still clings to those rules, even though his dad is no longer here to approve. I'm trying to break his reliance on them by showing him that rules are only a guide."

"And that maybe some of those rules are wrong?" Jesse added very quietly.

"Yes." She lifted her head and thrust out her chin. "That's why what you did for him tonight is so amazing. Jesse, I have never seen Noah so eager about anything. I'd really appreciate it if you could take him to see your campsite. I don't want to inconvenience you, but if he's truly interested in camping, perhaps I can find a way to build on that."

"I don't know exactly how long I'll be in Tucson." Jesse was cautious, aware that it would be all too easy to get involved with this pretty mom and her needy child. "But I'll certainly show him my campsite and cook him some s'mores, as I promised."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." She grinned cheekily. "Emma was right about you. You really are something." Then she sobered. "May I speak plainly?"

"Of course." He wondered what was coming.

“I want—in fact, I crave—your help with Noah. But I don’t want there to be any mistakes between us to spoil things.”

“Okay.” Where was this going?

“Please be clear that I am not looking for anything more, Jesse.”

“Pardon?” He watched her face flush and her hands knot as she said it, but Maddie’s intense gaze held his.

“I’m not looking for a husband or a father for my son. I was not a good wife. I did not love my husband the right way. I was a failure and one mistake was more than enough.” Maddie paused, then offered, “I’m not interested in romance. But I surely could use a friend.”

“You’ve got one.” Relieved, Jesse relaxed. “I feel the same. My fiancée recently dumped me. It’s been painful to discover that the woman I thought I’d love forever was not the person I believed her to be, and that I wasn’t the one she really wanted. She preferred my best friend. I still feel stupid, and I sure don’t want to go through that again, you know?”

He gulped, then expelled a rush of relief when Maddie nodded in understanding.

“I don’t think I’m meant to be anyone’s mate.” Jesse figured he might as well be blunt. “But friendship is something I think we could share. To help Noah.” He held out his hand. “So hello, friend Maddie.”

“Hello, friend Jesse.” Her slim fingers slid into his and gripped with a firmness he hadn’t expected. “Whatever I can help you

with, just ask.”

“A recommendation to Wranglers Ranch?” he suggested, as he drew his hand away, surprised that the warmth of her gentle touch lingered on his skin.

Maddie smiled, picked up the phone and dialed.

“Tanner, this is Maddie. We’re good, thanks. How’s baby Carter?” She chuckled at the response. “Poor you. Call me to babysit anytime. Listen, Tanner, I have a friend who’s looking for a job. I think he’d be perfect for Wranglers Ranch. His name is Jesse. He’s Emma’s grandson... Okay, I will. Bye.” She ended the call. “Stop by Wranglers anytime tomorrow.”

Jesse’s jaw dropped. “Just like that?”

“I told you there were advantages to living next door to Tanner and Sophie.”

“Thank you,” he said, and he meant it.

“You’re welcome.” When she checked her watch Jesse took that as his cue to leave.

“I should go. Thank you for a fun evening, Maddie. I enjoyed myself.” He rose and walked to the door, aware of her slight figure padding barefoot behind him. He pushed open the screen door and caught his breath.

The desert beyond lay in darkness save for an array of solar lights.

“It looks like someone painted a giant stained-glass butterfly.” He turned to look at her. “You?”

Maddie nodded, a satisfied smile tipping up her rosy lips.

“How?” Jesse couldn’t imagine the hours it must have taken to place each lamp just so in order to create this intricate design.

“I used a quilt pattern. Noah helped me get the wings right.” Her green eyes peered into the distance but Jesse was fairly certain she wasn’t staring at the lights because after a moment she said in a whisper-soft voice, “I dreamed of creating it a long time ago.” Her gaze slid to study him. “Maybe this is the year for my dreams to come true. First we moved to my ranch, then my butterfly became reality and now you’re here helping Noah.”

My ranch. My butterfly. Something about the way she said it got Jesse pondering what other dreams this woman held tucked deep inside.

“Will you be able to find your way to your campsite from here?”

Maddie looked so concerned that he hurried to remind her that he and his parents had once lived in Tucson.

“I’m glad you came back, Jesse.”

“So am I.” He walked toward his truck and was about to climb in when her quiet call stopped him.

“Jesse?”

“Yes?” He paused and peered toward her slim figure, saw her hands grip the balustrade as she tilted forward.

“Thank you very much.” The soft words brimmed with intensity.

He waved, then got into his truck and drove away, wondering why he knew that quiet expression of gratitude came from her

heart.

Maddie McGregor was a puzzle. She seemed young and innocent, and yet was apparently the product of a miserable childhood and a wretched marriage. Gutsy but somehow vulnerable. Nightshade and sunshine. She had a home taken straight from the pages of a magazine, but apart from a couple of quilts tossed over the sofa, it looked too neat to be truly lived in. In fact, aside from her quilts, there wasn't much in that house that said anything about Maddie McGregor.

That whimsical butterfly, however, said a lot. And that intrigued him.

When Gran came home Jesse intended to spend an evening plying her with questions about his new friend.

But as he lay in his tent, he had to remind himself to stop thinking about sweet Maddie McGregor.

You can't get involved. Nobody else gets hurt, remember?

Chapter Three

"Jesse." Tanner Johns shook his hand heartily. "You're Maddie's friend."

Relief suffused Jesse. After the fiasco in his Colorado church there hadn't been many who'd wanted to call him friend.

"And you're Emma's grandson." Tanner grinned. "Welcome to Wranglers Ranch."

"Thanks." A little taken aback by the warmth of his greeting, Jesse figured the cowboy must not know about his past. Tanner's next words disproved that.

“I was really sorry to hear about the death of that boy in your youth group.” His voice dropped. “It’s so hard to know what goes on inside a kid’s head. Thank God He knows.”

“Yeah.” Jesse gulped. He knew, so why didn’t He stop Scott?

“So you’re taking a break from your ministry.” Obviously unaware of Jesse’s revolving faith questions, Tanner tilted back on his boot heels, his voice thoughtful. “Sometimes it’s good to reassess if you’re where God wants you.”

“I guess Gran told you—” He stopped because Tanner was shaking his head.

“When it comes to kids’ work I keep my ear to the ground so I can pray for all of us who are working with these precious souls.” He grinned. “A friend of mine told me about your program in Colorado. Said you did amazing work. When he heard you’d resigned, he emailed me, ordered me to offer you a job if you happened by the area to visit Emma.”

“That’s kind of him,” Jesse murmured.

“He’s a man I trust, but he’s not the only one singing your praises. Your grandmother has lots of stories about you, too. One day I’d like to see all those rodeo trophies you’ve collected, cowboy.” Tanner chuckled at his grimace. “Okay, I’ll drop it. Don’t want to make you blush.”

“Thanks,” Jesse said with relief.

“Come on. I’ll show you around.” As they walked, Tanner explained that the focus of Wranglers was to reach kids through acceptance. “The man who owned this ranch, Burt, led me to

God here, and many after me. His dream was for Wranglers Ranch to become a sanctuary, a kind of camp for kids. When he passed away he left this spread to me to make his dream come true. I started working with street kids because I was one once and I knew the impact this place could have. God's kind of expanded my puny efforts. Now we host church groups, kids from social agencies, kids involved with the justice system, kids who just stop by to see what's going on and sick kids, to name a few."

"Wow." Jesse was awed by such an expansive ministry.

"We use equine-assisted learning programs," Tanner explained. "We try hard to reach every kid for God, but, like you, we do lose some. Not every kid who comes to Wranglers Ranch is ready or willing to turn his life around."

"All we can do is shed some light on the path," Jesse agreed. "They have to choose it."

"That's why my friend was so impressed with your work. He said you made sure your kids understood what making the choice to be a child of God entails." Tanner then pointed out the horses in the paddocks, the land that stretched to the Catalina Mountains and the hands whom he credited for keeping his ranch functioning. "Wranglers Ranch is all about spreading the love of God. We use every resource we have to do that."

That simple explanation of such a far-reaching ministry sent Jesse's admiration for this man soaring and upped his desire to be part of it, a small part, anyway. But how to do it without getting

personally involved?

“My friend said you have your degree in counseling.” Tanner lifted one eyebrow.

“I went to college before I attended seminary,” Jesse said.

“Actually, you started college on the expedited track when you were fourteen,” Tanner corrected, a smile flickering at the corner of his mouth. “And left several years later with your master’s degree in counseling.”

“Yeah, I was kind of a misfit.” It seemed Tanner had collected a lot of information about him, but Jesse wasn’t going to add to it. It had taken forever to shed the geek label he’d carried in those days. He sure didn’t want it back now.

“I’m not asking because I want you to do any counseling, Jesse.” Tanner’s quiet voice belied his probing look. “That’s not what we do here.”

“Then...?” He was mystified as to what his job might be.

“No counseling, but I sure wouldn’t mind having someone with your credentials on-site.” Tanner tilted his head to one side. “You’re what—twenty-seven?”

Jesse nodded.

“You have education and life experience. You’ve worked with kids a lot so you have an advantage in spotting the kid who’s good at hiding his feelings but desperately needs an outlet. You’re probably more able than any of us here to spot the kid who’s walking a tightrope of despair. That’s what I want at Wranglers Ranch,” Tanner said thoughtfully. “We need someone who’ll

catch the kid we've missed or the one whose needs haven't been properly addressed."

"I didn't manage that so well in Colorado," Jesse admitted, the shame of it rushing up inside.

"You didn't see your youth group kids' struggles?" Tanner's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Yes, of course, but—"

"You didn't go out of your way to talk to each of them privately, take them for coffee, spend extra time praying for them?" Tanner's probing was relentless. "Come on, Jesse. Tell me you didn't do everything you could to help each one of them."

"Yes, I did." Guilt ate like acid inside him. "But in the end it didn't make any difference, because I failed to save Scott."

"How do you know you didn't make any difference?" Tanner touched his shoulder, his voice quiet. "But whether you did or didn't isn't the point. We're called to show God's love. He takes it from there."

"I guess." Yet no matter how many months had passed, Jesse still couldn't wrap his mind around why it had happened.

"If you're still interested, here's the job. Work as a ranch hand. Offer as much love and caring as you can to every kid that comes to Wranglers Ranch, while keeping your eyes peeled for problems. If you find something that needs changing, you tell me." Tanner studied him, waiting.

"I see." Could he do this and still remain detached? Jesse wondered.

“At Wranglers we don’t counsel anyone,” Tanner enunciated. “Our job is first and foremost to befriend every kid who comes here, to make them feel this is a safe place and that we’re here to help. Together we try to reach every child who shows up.”

So maybe he could still be a kind of youth pastor, just in a different way, without letting himself get too personally involved with any of the kids. Was that what God wanted?

“I’d like to be a part of Wranglers Ranch.” Jesse held out his hand. “Thank you, Tanner.”

“Today’s Friday. Start on Monday?” Tanner smiled at his nod as he shook hands. “Noah says you’re camping out.”

“For now.” Jesse chuckled. “I had the impression Noah wouldn’t mind joining me. He got this look on his face—I gather he’s never camped before.”

“No. His father wouldn’t have allowed that.” Tanner’s expression grew solemn. “Maddie sometimes helps Sophie with our new baby, Carter, and Noah visits our kids a lot, so I’ve gotten to know the McGregor family fairly well since they moved in next door. Noah struggles to deal with his father’s death and his list of unbreakable rules.”

“Maddie told you about it?” Jesse blinked in surprise when Tanner shook his head.

“I’ve never heard Maddie talk about her husband except to say he died.” The rancher inclined his head. “I did attend Liam’s church once, years ago.”

“And?” Jesse could hardly control his curiosity about sweet

Maddie's former husband.

"Liam McGregor was much older than her, a stern man whom I thought was overly focused on details instead of God's love. I wouldn't say Liam found joy in his faith, more like it was his duty." Concern lay etched in the fine lines around Tanner's eyes. "His legacy of rule-keeping isn't helping Noah."

"Noah seems almost..." Jesse hesitated "...emotionally backward?"

"He's been diagnosed as a very high functioning autistic. After Liam's death, Maddie moved him from public school into a private setting to challenge him and to help his social awkwardness." Tanner's gaze turned assessing. "Noah probably feels like you did when you were so far ahead of other kids your age."

"Then I feel sorry for him." Jesse winced at the cascade of memories. "Social ineptitude leaves you out of the group, on your own and desperate for a friend. Except you don't know how to make them, and if you do, it's hard to discern which one is a real friend. You can't reach out, or you're afraid to in case others make fun of you. It's a lonely place and depression can easily creep in."

"And autism makes it ten times harder. I knew you'd be an asset here." Tanner looked pleased by his evaluation. "Wranglers Ranch is hosting Noah's class in a beginners' riding group next week. Both Maddie and Noah's teacher hope that working with the horses will help all of the kids relax their barriers, form some

social bonds and develop a team spirit.”

“A few riding classes are going to do all that?” Jesse asked skeptically.

“You’ve worked with horses. Didn’t you ever feel the animals were a kindred spirit?” Tanner asked.

“My own horse, yes.” Jesse smiled in remembrance. “In fact Coal Tar seemed to sense exactly what I needed him to do before I asked, but I raised him, worked with him for years.”

“Here at Wranglers Ranch our animals are mostly abused stock that we’ve rescued. Maybe that makes them extra sensitive, but I think you’ll soon see that as the kids work with their horses week after week, a bond develops. A kind of mutual trust.” Tanner’s self-deprecating shrug said a lot. “We’ve seen it happen over and over. Time at Wranglers Ranch with our horses always brings a change in the kids. You’ll see it, too, Jesse.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” And he was. Meantime maybe he could learn more about his new friend. “Maddie seems very attuned to Noah.”

“Her son is her whole world,” Tanner agreed quietly. “Everything she does is for him, which is great but...”

“But?”

“But I wish she’d take more time to replenish her own well. Sophie and I keep hoping she’ll accept your grandmother’s offer of a partnership in her quilting store,” Tanner said quietly.

“I guess that would help Gran, but maybe Maddie can’t afford it or isn’t well versed enough in business,” Jesse suggested.

“She is on both scores.” Tanner smiled. “Maddie told us she purchased her ranch with part of a sizable life insurance policy she received after Liam’s death, so she can certainly afford to buy the business. But the best part is the way she feels about quilts. She loves anything to do with them. She seems to come alive when she’s working with fabric, as if the texture and pattern allow her to express feelings she usually keeps tucked inside.”

“So what’s the problem?” Jesse felt he was missing something. “Why hasn’t she bought Gran’s business already? I think Gran would sell.”

“I believe Maddie refuses to buy out Emma because she lacks confidence in herself. From what she’s said, I think she believes she isn’t capable, and that simply isn’t true. She’s a very capable woman. I saw that when she was buying and moving to the ranch.”

“Really?” Jesse was intrigued.

“Maddie had organized everything ahead of time. She prepared the house so the movers knew exactly where every box went. By the end of moving day, she had everything unpacked and in place, which I find astonishing.” He grimaced.

“Why?” What was this about? Jesse wondered.

“Because it was nothing like that when I helped Sophie and the kids move here after we were married. We still haven’t unpacked some of her bags and boxes.” His pained look said it all. “Maddie is detail-oriented, has foresight and considers everything from many angles.”

“So?” Jesse waited, curious to hear the rest.

“I think Maddie McGregor lacks confidence because she hasn’t ever had anyone to champion her, urge her to reach out of her comfort zone and support her efforts. In fact, judging by what I’ve garnered, I think she’s been put down and deprecated.”

Tanner didn’t say it, but Jesse had the distinct impression he was referring to Maddie’s former husband. The gourmet cook, he remembered, recalling Maddie’s downcast face when she’d said that.

His new boss changed the subject by moving on to discuss hours, wages, staff meetings and a myriad of other employment details that Jesse only half heard because his mind was busy trying to put together a puzzle called Maddie.

As if he’d conjured her, she drove up at the end of his interview, as he was walking to his truck—which, he noticed with disgust, had a flat tire. She climbed out of her car and hurried toward him, her green eyes dark and shadowed.

“Hi,” he said, a bubble of joy building inside his chest. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, but I need to talk to you, Jesse.” Maddie looked serious. “About Emma.”

His heart squeezed so tight he could hardly breathe. “What’s wrong?” he asked, forcing the words out through his blocked throat.

“She’s in hospital in Las Cruces.” Maddie paused.

“What happened?” Panic gripped him.

“She was in a car accident. Among other injuries, including a fractured wrist, her hip was damaged. She’s undergoing hip replacement surgery as we speak.” Maddie’s fingers rested on his arm, as if to comfort him as she continued.

“And?” Jesse steeled himself to hear the rest.

“Her friend Eunice, her passenger, was not badly hurt. She’s the one who called your parents. Apparently they’re flying in to see Emma. They asked Eunice to notify me at the shop, hoping I’d heard from you, since they knew you intended to stop in Tucson to visit her.”

“Is Gran going to be all right?” The very thought of not having Emma there when he needed her sent a wave of devastation through Jesse. He gulped hard, lifted his head and found compassion in Maddie’s gaze. “I can’t lose her,” he whispered brokenly.

“You’re not going to lose her, Jesse.” Maddie touched his cheek, forcing him to keep looking at her. “This is Emma, remember? She’s very strong. You know she has a to-do list as long as my arm?” When he nodded, Maddie smiled. “Then you also know she’s not going anywhere until that list is finished. Right?”

“Yes.” He exhaled and smiled at her. “Thank you, Maddie.”

“I’m praying for Emma.” Her worried look returned. “But I’m very concerned about Quilt Essentials. Should I close the doors?”

“But...you’ve been running it for her. Can’t you keep doing that?” Jesse asked.

“I’ve only ever taken over for a couple of days. Hip replacements have a long recovery time.” Maddie looked scared at the prospect of handling the business on her own.

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