



A COWBOY FAMILY CHRISTMAS

Judy Duarte

 *Cherish*™

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Аннотация

Holiday Ranch Reunion Leanne Walsh is stunned when Reuben Walsh returns to his family's ranch for the holidays. No matter how hard she tried to convince herself that marrying the more stable Walsh brother was the right decision, it was unpredictable Reuben who held her heart – until he broke it. Leanne's frosty reception cuts deeper than Reuben expected, yet he can't leave the widowed single mom shorthanded with Christmas drawing near. He built his dreams around Leanne once before, and now is trying to resist her and her sweet young son. But in a season full of surprises, the promise of family is a gift too tempting to ignore.

Dear Santa,

I've been a good girl. Well, mostly.

These days, I'm usually the one dishing out advice. But the readers of "Dear Debbie" don't know that I've never been the love of anyone's life. As soon as I landed at the Rocking Chair Ranch, though, my luck started to change...thanks to one special guest. Promoter Drew Madison wants to shine a spotlight on the ranch's retired cowboys. But I'm the one who feels aglow every time he glances my way. And the electricity between us? It sure could light up every town in Texas! Still, after he discovers my secret, I'm afraid that I'll be thrust back into darkness. Now I only want one thing for Christmas: for Drew to give me—no, us—a second chance...

—Lainie

"Here, try a bite."

He opened his mouth and relished the creamy, sweet taste bursting on his tongue.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's good." He withdrew a clean spoon from the drawer, dipped it into the small mixing bowl and offered it to her. "Your turn."

"Okay." Her mouth opened and closed around the spoon, tasting it herself. Then she ran the tip of her tongue over her lips.

His knees went weak, and an almost overwhelming urge rose up inside, pressing him to take her in his arms and kiss her. But he couldn't do that. He shouldn't anyway, and tamped down the

compulsion as best he could.

Still, he continued to study her.

“Hmm, this is really good.” Her voice came out soft. Sweet. Smooth.

He couldn't help himself; he reached out and brushed the flour from the tip of her nose.

Desire flared, his heart pumped hard and steady and his hand stilled. The temptation to kiss her senseless rose up again, stronger than ever. But he wouldn't do that.

He shouldn't.

Oh, why the hell not?

* * *

Rocking Chair Rodeo: Cowboys—and true love—never go out of style!

A Cowboy Family Christmas

Judy Duarte



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Since 2002, USA TODAY bestselling author JUDY DUARTE has written over forty books for Mills & Boon. Cherish, earned two RITA® Award nominations, won two Maggie Awards and received a National Readers' Choice Award. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she enjoys

traveling with her husband and spending quality time with her grandchildren. You can learn more about Judy and her books at her website, www.judyduarte.com, or at [Facebook.com/judyduartenovelist](https://www.facebook.com/judyduartenovelist).

To my aunties:

Dorothy Johnston Eggleston and Loraine Shaw. Thank you for your incredible love and support over the years. I love you both!

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Extract

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Chapter One

Dear Debbie,

I'm desperate and need your help.

Elena Montoya studied the first of several letters she'd been handed during her job interview at The Brighton Valley Gazette. She'd come here today, hoping to get her foot in the door at the small-town newspaper, but as a reporter. Not someone offering advice to the lovelorn in a weekly column.

Mr. Carlton, the balding, middle-aged editor, leaned forward, resting clasped hands on his desk. "So what do you think?"

Seriously? Elena would be hard-pressed to offer advice to anyone, especially someone with romantic trouble. But she didn't want to reveal her inexperience or doubt. "I'd hoped to land a different assignment—or another type of column."

"Let's see what you can do with this first." Mr. Carlton leaned back in his desk chair, the springs creaking under his weight, the buttons of his cotton shirt straining to contain his middle-age spread.

Elena knew better than to turn down work, even though this job wasn't a good fit. Worse yet, the pay he'd offered her wasn't enough to cover a pauper's monthly expenses. And since she was new in town, she needed a way to support herself.

But as an advice columnist? The irony was laughable.

"You look a bit...uneasy," the editor said.

She was. Either Mr. Carlton had neglected to read her resume or he'd confused her with another applicant.

"It's just that..." She cleared her throat and chose her words carefully. "Well, don't get me wrong. I'm happy to have this position, but I only took two psych courses in college. And since I majored in journalism, I'm more qualified to work as a reporter."

"Don't worry. It shouldn't be too difficult for a young woman like you, Elena."

She cringed at his use of her given name. The last thing she needed was for her new co-workers at the newspaper—or any rodeo fans in the small Texas community—to connect the dots and realize who she was. And why she looked familiar—in spite of her efforts to change her appearance.

"By the way," she said, "I go by Lainie." At least, that's the childhood nickname her twin sister had given her.

"All right," Mr. Carlton said. "Then Lainie it is. But keep in mind you'll be known as 'Dear Debbie' around here. We like her true identity to be a secret."

A temporary secret identity was just what Lainie needed. After that embarrassing evening, when rodeo star Craig Baxter's wife had caught him and Elena together at a hotel restaurant in Houston and assumed the worst, Elena had done her best to lay low. The next day, she'd relocated to a ranch outside of Brighton Valley, where she could hide out until she could rise above those awful rumors—all of which were either untrue or blown way out of proportion.

Elena had tried to explain how she'd come to be there that night—how she had no idea that Craig was a rodeo star, let alone married—to no avail. Kara Baxter had been so angry at her husband, she'd thrown a margarita in Elena's face and read him the riot act. As if that hadn't been bad enough, someone at another table had caught it all on video, and the whole, ugly scene had gone viral. And now Kara's friends and Craig's fans blamed her for splitting up a marriage that wouldn't have lasted anyway.

"Do you have any other questions?" Mr. Carlton asked.

As a matter of fact, she had a ton of them, but she didn't want to show any sign of insecurity.

"I do have one question," she admitted. "Some of the people writing these letters could be dealing with serious issues. And if that's the case, I'm not qualified to offer them any advice." Nor should she counsel anyone, for that matter.

Mr. Carlton shook his head and waved off her concern. "Our last Debbie used to have a stock answer for the bigger problems. She told them to seek professional help."

Lainie nodded. "Okay. Then I'll use that response." A lot.

"Just focus on the interesting letters or on those that trigger a clever response," Mr. Carlton said. "It's really just entertainment for most people. But keep in mind, if the readership of the Dear Debbie column increases, I'll give you a bigger assignment in the future."

At least, he'd given her a chance to prove herself, something she'd had to do time and again since the third grade, when she'd

gone from a foster home to a pediatric intensive care unit and lost track of her sister. "I'll give it my best shot, Mr. Carlton."

"Okay, kid. What's the best number if I need to get a hold of you?"

"I listed my cell on my resume, although that's not the best way to reach me. I'm temporarily staying at the Rocking Chair Ranch. Since the reception isn't very good there, and the Wi-Fi is worse, you'd better call me on the landline." She pointed to her resume, which he'd set aside on his desk. "I included that number, too, and marked it with an asterisk."

"If you don't mind me asking, why are you staying at a retirement home for old cowboys?"

"Because I'm filling in for the ranch cook, who'll be gone for the next three weeks." When Lainie first heard about the temporary position, she'd declined. But after that awful run-in with Kara Baxter, she'd changed her mind and accepted it out of desperation, realizing it would provide her with a place to stay until she could find something better and more permanent in town.

Oddly enough, she actually felt a lot more comfortable staying at the Rocking C than she'd thought she would. And she liked the old men who lived there. Most of them were sweet, and even the crotchety few were entertaining.

Mr. Carlton pushed back his chair and got to his feet, signaling the interview was over.

Lainie stood, too. Still hoping for something more respectable

and better paying, she said, “I minored in photography, so if you need a photojournalist, that’s another option.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Consider this your trial run, kid.”

Lainie nodded and reached for her purse.

Mr. Carlton headed for the door of his office and opened it for her. “I’ll send you a copy of the letters electronically, and even if you’re somewhere with terrible web access, your column is due by email before midnight on Wednesday. I can’t wait to see it.”

“You won’t be disappointed. I’ll channel my inner Debbie.” Lainie tamped down her doubt, offered him a smile and lifted the letters in her hand. “You’ll love what I do with these.”

Mr. Carlton beamed, clearly convinced that she’d work a miracle of some kind, but Lainie knew better. And she feared that by Friday morning, when her first column came out, her inadequacy would come to light.

* * *

Rodeo promoter Drew Madison drove his pickup down the county highway on his way to the Rocking C Ranch, listening to a Brad Paisley hit on the radio and sporting a confident grin. His plans for the Rocking Chair Rodeo were finally coming together, and a date had finally been set. The county-wide event would be held at the Brighton Valley Fairgrounds in April.

Drew’s boss at Esteban Enterprises had granted him free rein on the project, although he’d insisted that Drew move in to the Rocking Chair Ranch for a few weeks, interview the old cowboys who lived there and write a few blog posts sharing their stories.

While Drew had graduated from college and certainly knew how to put a sentence together, he'd never considered himself a writer. But his promotion to VP of the company was on the line, so he'd brushed away his doubt and agreed to do it.

Besides, how hard could writing a few stories be?

His cell phone rang, the Bluetooth automatically shutting out the Brad Paisley tune. He assumed it was another business call, but when he looked at the dashboard and spotted his sister's name on the display, his heart clenched.

Kara Lee had been going through a lot lately, so he'd made it a point to check up on her each morning and evening. To have her contact him in the middle of the day was a little unsettling.

He answered quickly and tried to keep his tone upbeat. "Hey, sis. What's up?"

"Not much. I'm just bored, I guess. I called your office, and they said you were traveling. Not that it really matters, but I thought you would've mentioned something about it to me."

He hadn't meant to keep it a secret, but neither had he wanted her to worry about him being gone and unable to get to the hospital in time if she went into labor. She'd nearly lost her baby last week and was on complete bed rest now.

"Actually," he said, "it's a new assignment. I meant to tell you about it, but I had to cut our morning call short."

"How long will you be gone this time?"

Longer than he wanted to admit, although he was looking forward to meeting the retired cowboys. "I'll be gone for a few

weeks, but I'm not far from Houston. If you need me, all you have to do is call. I can get there within a couple of hours."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," she said, but the tone of her voice betrayed her words. "I'll be fine."

He certainly hoped so. Kara Lee had wanted to be a mother for as long as she could cuddle a dolly. And after three miscarriages, she'd made it to the fifth month this time around. For each day the little boy remained in the womb, the better chance he had.

"So where's this assignment?" she asked.

"The Rocking Chair Ranch. The rodeo will be sponsoring them in the spring, so I'm working on the promotion."

"Is that the retirement home for cowboys?"

"And ranchers." He'd been reluctant to mention anything about rodeos or cowboys since the night she found out her husband, rodeo star Craig Baxter, was having another affair. The stress from the confrontation with him and his lover had caused her to go into premature labor.

When Drew got word of the public blowup and learned that Kara Lee had been hospitalized, he'd wanted to beat the tar out of his brother-in-law. But Kara Lee had begged him not to, and he'd been reluctant to do anything to upset his kid sister, especially when the survival of her son was precarious. But that didn't mean he wouldn't be tempted to knock Craig's lights out the next time he saw him.

Kara Lee had told Craig to pack his crap and to get out of the house, which he did. But she hadn't yet filed for divorce, mostly

because she wasn't able to deal with the legal proceedings when she was lying flat on her back. But once the baby came, Drew would do whatever he could to facilitate a fair and amicable split. One of his friends was a divorce attorney in Houston, and he'd already mentioned the case to him. He just hoped his sister didn't soften and take Craig back.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked her again.

"Yeah, especially since I've made it to the twenty-sixth week. At least the baby now has a chance to survive."

"That's good to know."

As silence filled the line, he decided to change the subject. "So what are you doing?" The moment the question rolled off his tongue, he wanted to reel it back in. Hell, what could a bedridden pregnant woman possibly do, other than read or watch TV?

She let out a sigh. "I wish I could work on the nursery, but I'll have to wait until after little Robby gets here."

"I'll tell you what," Drew said. "As soon as I finish this project at the Rocking C, I'll spend a few days at your place. Make a Pinterest board of stuff you like. When I get back, I'll be your hands and feet. We'll have it done before you know it."

"I love you, Drew."

"Aw, for Pete's sake. Don't get all sappy on me, Kara Lee." She'd been a tomboy when growing up—and a barrel racer in high school. So he wasn't used to seeing her softer side. It must be her hormones.

"You're the best, Drew."

“No. I’m not.” He’d taken on a demanding job that required him to travel, so he hadn’t been there for her recently, like he’d always been in the past.

He kicked himself for that now. If he’d been around more, he might have talked her out of marrying Craig. But that was all muddy water under the bridge now. From here on out, Drew was going to be the brother she deserved.

If Kara Lee suffered yet another miscarriage, losing the baby she’d already named and loved, there was no telling what it would do to her.

“By the way,” he said. “I called an agency that provides home health services and asked them to send someone out to your house for a few hours each day. She’ll do some light cleaning and run errands for you while I’m gone.”

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“I know, but I wanted to. It makes me feel better to know someone is with you or at least just a phone call away.” He thought she might object, more out of pride than anything else. But she surprised him by accepting his effort to help.

“You know what, Drew? You’re going to make some woman a wonderful husband.”

He laughed. “My last two relationships didn’t fare very well, thanks to all my travel.” Well, that and the fact that he was beginning to enjoy being a tumbleweed, rolling through life on the whim of the wind.

Just like your old man? He winced, then discarded the thought

as quickly as it came. He wasn't at all like his father.

"Besides," he added, "I'm not cut out for marriage, family or a home in the suburbs. If I was, I wouldn't enjoy being on the road so often."

"A woman who really loves you wouldn't complain about you being gone."

"I don't know about that. You'd be surprised."

"At least, you'd never cheat on her." She paused for a beat. "You wouldn't cheat, would you?"

"Me? No, I've always been honest with the women I date. From the very first time we go out, I make it clear that I'm not the domestic type."

"I'm not buying that," Kara Lee said.

Drew wasn't about to let his little sister psychoanalyze him. Who knew what assumptions she'd come to, right or wrong.

When he spotted the big yellow sign that indicated he'd reached the Rocking C, he said, "Listen, I have to hang up now. But I'll give you a call this evening."

"You don't have to. I know how busy you are."

"I'm never too busy for you."

And that was the truth. Kara Lee was the only family Drew had left, and after all they'd been through, especially her, she deserved to be happy—and to finally be a mom.

"I'm curious," she said. "Where will you be staying while on the ranch?"

"They're putting me up in one of the cabins so I can get a

feel for the daily routine. It's not just a retirement home, it's a working ranch. So the whole enterprise is new and innovative. I'd like to check it out."

"Good luck."

"Thanks. I'm actually looking forward to having a change of pace—and to being in the same place for longer than a few days."

"So says the family rover. Maybe you're more cut out for home and hearth than you think, especially if you meet the right woman."

"Oh, yeah? We'll see about that." Drew turned onto the long, graveled drive that led to the Rocking Chair Ranch. "I'll talk to you later."

When the line disconnected, he slowly shook his head. If there was one thing he'd learned over his thirty-one years, it was easier to be a rover than to deal with the countless people who weren't what they seemed and were bound to disappoint you.

Thank goodness he wasn't likely to meet any of that type on the Rocking C.

* * *

It had been two days since Mr. Carlton had hired Lainie to write the Dear Debbie column, but she still hadn't made any headway in answering a single letter.

She'd been busy settling into her temporary job. But that wasn't the whole story. In fact, none of the problems of people seeking Debbie's advice had triggered a clever or witty response, and Lainie was stumped.

She sat at the kitchen table, reading through the letters, trying to choose an interesting one or two to include in her first Dear Debbie column. While she pondered, her fingers tapped softly on the keyboard without typing out a single word. She glanced at the clock on the microwave, noting how much time had passed since she'd done the breakfast dishes, and blew out a sigh. Her midnight deadline loomed.

"You can do this," she whispered aloud. Then she reread the letter on top of the stack.

Last year, I met John, the most handsome, amazing man in the world, and I knew I'd finally met Mr. Right.

Last month, Lainie had met Craig...

Darn it. She had to stop projecting that jerk into each of these stupid letters written by someone who'd either been jilted or disappointed by various people in their lives.

All I've ever wanted was to fall in love and get married, but now my heart is broken, and my life is a wreck.

"Tell me about it," Lainie muttered. Well, not the broken heart. She'd gone out with Craig only three times, but the rest of it sounded pretty darned familiar.

Then, a few weeks ago, a woman who works at John's office started hitting on him and lured him away from me.

Lainie leaned back in the chair and shook her head. From the comments left on the YouTube video of her that night at the Houston hotel, it seemed everyone in the rodeo world thought she'd targeted a married man and tried to lure him away.

During the blowup, his wife had told him off, implying that he was a serial cheater, a secret he apparently kept from his legion of fans.

“Aw, come on,” Lainie scolded herself. “Focus on this woman, this letter, this problem.”

Yet how could she? She was the last person in the world who should offer romantic advice to anyone, let alone a stranger who hoped for an easy fix.

Darn it. No matter how badly she’d wanted a job at the Gazette—and she needed one if she wanted to support herself—she’d been crazy to agree to taking over for Dear Debbie.

Footsteps sounded in the doorway, drawing her from her reading. She glanced up to see Otis “Sully” Sullivan enter the kitchen. The sweet, kindhearted old man had a jolly way about him. Each time she laid eyes on the retired cowboy, she couldn’t help but smile. With a head of thick white hair and a full beard, he reminded her of Santa Claus, especially today when he wore a solid red flannel shirt.

“Hey, Sully.”

“I’m sorry to bother you, but is there any more coffee?”

Lainie set aside the letter she’d been reading, pushed back her chair and got to her feet. “It’s no bother at all. And you’re in luck. There’s still at least a cup left.”

She poured the last of the carafe into a white mug. “I could make a fresh pot.”

“No need for you to go to any extra trouble.” Sully took the

mug she gave him, gripping it with gnarled hands, and thanked her. “That was a nice breakfast you fixed us today. I haven’t had good chilaquiles in a long time. My late wife used to make them for me every Sunday morning, but she usually overcooked them.”

Lainie laughed. “Did she? How were mine?”

“Best I’ve ever had. Nice, crispy tortillas. Perfectly scrambled eggs. Mmm, mmm, mmm.”

Lainie beamed at the compliment. She wasn’t used to getting many. “Thanks, I’m glad you liked them. When I was a little girl, my grandmother used to make them for me and my sister.”

“You got a sister?”

“Yes, a twin.”

Sully brightened. “Where is she?”

Lainie had no idea. The two of them had been separated years ago, when Lainie had been taken from the group home and sent to the hospital to be treated for an undetected congenital heart defect. It had taken a while for the doctors to decide upon a treatment plan, and by the time Lainie recovered from her lifesaving surgery, a couple arrived at the children’s home, adopted the healthy girl and left the sickly one behind. From what Lainie had gathered, her sister’s new parents had been afraid to assume financial responsibility of a child with such serious medical issues.

As a result, she hadn’t seen her twin since, but she offered Sully the happy outcome she’d imagined for Erica. “She’s happily married to her high school sweetheart and has a two-year-old

daughter.”

Before Sully could press further, Lainie turned the conversation back to the chilaquiles. “Anyway, my grandmother passed away before she could pass on her recipe. But when I got older, I did some research and a little experimenting until I came up with a batch that tasted nearly as good as hers. I hope they weren’t too spicy.”

“No,” he said, “not at all. The salsa was perfect. In fact, that was one of the tastiest meals I’ve had since I moved in here. Not that Joy, our regular cook, isn’t a good one, but she’s more of a down-home, meat-and-potatoes gal. And I like good Mexican food once in a while.”

“That’s a relief. I knew I’d have some big shoes to fill, taking Joy’s place in the kitchen while she’s on her honeymoon.”

“I haven’t heard any complaints yet. And that’s saying a lot, considering some of the old geezers who live here. They rarely keep their opinions to themselves.” Sully glanced at the letters on the table. “I didn’t mean to bother you. I’ll just take my coffee into the living room and let you get back to whatever it was you were doing.”

“Actually, I don’t mind the interruption.” Although she really should. With each tick and tock of the kitchen clock, her midnight deadline drew closer. And who knew if the ranch internet would work? She might have to drive into town and find Wi-Fi somewhere. Darn it.

“You look fretful, which doesn’t do your pretty face any good.

What's bothering you?" Sully nodded toward the stack of letters. "I hope it isn't bad news."

"It's just...a friend with a problem." Lainie chewed her fingernail and stared at the pile of unanswered letters. "I'm trying to come up with some wise advice, but I'm not feeling very wise."

Sully's smile softened the lines in his craggy face. "Wisdom comes with age and experience. Back when I was in my twenties, heck, thirties, too, I was under the false notion that I was as smart as I'd ever get."

Lainie had thought the same thing after her college graduation, which wasn't very long ago. Then Craig had taken her for a ride, leaving her with an unearned bad reputation and distrustful of sweet-talking men who couldn't tell the truth to save their souls. She'd learned a big lesson the hard way, but that hadn't made her an expert at facing romantic dilemmas.

"Want me to give it a shot?" Sully asked.

Was he offering his advice? Lainie wasn't sure what the dear old man might have to say, but at this point, she'd take all the help she could get. "Sure, if you don't mind."

Sully pulled out a chair, took a seat and rested his steaming hot mug on the table. "What's the problem?"

Lainie scanned the opening of the letter and caught him up to speed, revealing that her "friend" was twenty-four years old, relatively nice-looking with a decent job and a good sense of humor. Then she read the rest of it out loud.

"Three weeks ago, I found out the guy I was living with, the

man of my dreams, was seeing another woman. We had a big fight, and he moved out. I've been crying every day, and I'm desperate to win him back."

Sully clucked his tongue. "A man who cheats on his partner, romantic or otherwise, isn't a prize worth winning back. That's what I'd tell her."

Lainie had once thought Craig was a prize, and boy, had she been wrong about that. It's a shame she hadn't had Sully nearby when she'd been taken in by that liar's soft Southern drawl. But Sully was here now. And providing the wisdom this letter writer needed.

"That's a good point," Lainie said. It was clever, too, and a good response for the column. "I'll mention that to...my friend."

Male voices sounded outside, growing louder until the mudroom door squeaked open. A second later, Nate Gallagher, the acting foreman, entered the kitchen.

Sully acknowledged Nate with a nod, but Lainie focused on the man walking behind him. She guessed him to be a rancher or horseman, since his stylish Western wear suggested he could afford to hire someone to do the dirty work. He was in his early to midthirties, tall and nice looking, with broad shoulders and a rugged build.

He removed his black Stetson, revealing sandy-blond hair, which he wore longer than most of the rodeo cowboys she'd met. Not that she'd ever been a buckle bunny or even attracted to that kind of guy before she'd met Craig.

And after that awful night, she'd sworn off men indefinitely. Yet she found herself stirred by this one's presence. He also looked familiar. Had she met him before?

"Meet Drew Madison," Nate said. "He's handling the Rocking Chair Rodeo promotion."

Just the word rodeo sent Lainie's heart slamming into her chest. Had she seen him while on one of the few dates she'd had with Craig?

No, she'd never forget a man like him.

But if he and Craig ran in the same circles, he might recognize her. For that reason, she'd better get out of here. She didn't mind being around the older cowboys, some of whom had ridden in the rodeo back in the days before cable television and social media. But a recent connection spelled trouble—and further humiliation.

Nevertheless, she wouldn't be rude to a ranch visitor. So she placed the letter she'd been holding upside down on the rest of the stack on the table. Then she got to her feet and said, "It's nice to meet you. I'll put on a pot of coffee."

Then she did just that. If there was one thing she'd learned in her short time at the Rocking C, it was that the cowboys, young and old, loved a fresh brew.

As the coffee began to perk, Lainie studied the pot as if it might bounce off the countertop if she didn't stand guard.

She fingered the side of her head, checking to see if any strands had come loose. She used to wear it long, the curls

tumbling along her shoulders and down her back. But after that video had gone viral, she'd pulled it up into a prim topknot—just one of several alterations she'd made to her appearance so she could fade into the background until that ugly incident was forgotten.

When the coffeemaker let out a last steamy gurgle, she poured two cups, then turned to face the younger men. They continued to stand in the middle of the kitchen, speaking to Sully, who was still seated at the table. She was about to excuse herself and leave them to chat among themselves, but her curiosity betrayed her and she took one last glance at Drew, who'd zeroed in on her.

"For some reason," he said, his gaze intense enough to see right through her, "it seems as if I've met you before."

"That's not likely," she said. "I'm not from around here."

"Where are you from?"

She wanted to ask, What's up with the third degree? Instead, she said, "I'm from up north—originally. But I'm sure we've never met. I just have that kind of face. I get comments like that all the time. Sugar? Cream?"

"I like it black."

His gaze continued to roam over her, as if removing her façade one piece at a time. But she pushed through the discomfort and handed him a mug.

He thanked her but didn't take a drink. Instead, those baby blues continued to study her as if trying to pinpoint where they'd met. But wouldn't she remember if they had? A woman wouldn't

forget a man like him.

No, he was mistaken. She glanced down at the loose blouse and baggy jeans she wore today. She hadn't used any makeup. Her curls had been pulled into a bun.

But when she again looked at him, when their gazes locked, her heart soared and her hormones flared. For a moment she wished she'd been wearing that red dress Craig had given her for her birthday and insisted that she wear to the hotel that night, their first significant date, where they were to celebrate by having dinner. But she suspected someone who frequented thrift shops had already snatched it up, pleased with their find.

"If you'll excuse me," Lainie said, "I have work to do."

Then she left the kitchen and headed for her room.

After that awful night in Houston, she'd made up her mind to steer clear of handsome cowboys. And Drew Madison was as handsome as any cowboy she'd ever seen.

Chapter Two

Drew leaned back in his chair and watched the housekeeper stride toward the kitchen doorway. She wasn't the kind of woman he usually found attractive, but for some reason he did, and he hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her.

She had a wholesome, clean-cut way about her. Maybe it was the lack of makeup, which she really didn't need. She looked cute in those baggy overalls and plain white T-shirt, but there seemed to be real beauty underneath.

Her dark hair had been pulled up in a simple topknot, but he

imagined it'd be lush and glossy if she wore it loose. And those brown, soulful eyes? A man could get lost in them.

She'd said they'd never met, and she was probably right. Her name didn't ring a bell. Laney? It wasn't one you heard every day.

Even though she'd already stepped out of the kitchen, he continued to watch the open doorway until Nate mentioned Drew's sister.

"How's Kara Lee doing?" he said. "It must have been devastating for her to lose another baby."

"She's still pregnant, thank goodness."

"Really?" Nate said. "That's good news. I'd heard otherwise, which would have been a real shame."

"There're a lot of rumors going around." Hell, Drew had heard most of them.

"Speaking of babies," Drew said. "How's little Jessica?"

Nate, who'd recently assumed custody of his newborn daughter, a preemie, broke into a proud papa grin. "She's doing great—and growing like a weed."

"And Anna?"

Nate's smile deepened. "She's the best thing that ever happened to me. I love being married."

"Better you than me," Drew said.

Nate chuckled. "Anyway, I'm glad Kara Lee's doing all right."

"Part of what you heard was true," Nate said. "She did go into labor the night she caught Craig cheating. Thankfully, her obstetrician managed to stop the contractions, but she's on bed

rest for the time being.”

“That’s got to be tough,” Nate said. “Especially for an active woman like her.”

“You got that right, she’s determined to have this baby. And she’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Well, give her my best,” Nate said. “I know how badly she wants a kid.”

“This one’s a boy. And she plans to name him Robert. Bobby for short.”

“I hate to even bring up his name, but how’s Craig fit into the picture? I heard he’s been begging her to forgive him.”

Drew’s back stiffened. “Where did you hear that?”

“Just around. There’s been a lot of talk.”

Drew wished that was one rumor he could debunk, but it was true. Craig had been calling her, promising her the moon. “I can’t see her taking him back. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was still seeing that sexy brunette who was with him in that hotel restaurant.”

“Knowing Craig like I do, you’re probably right.” Nate crossed his arms. “I didn’t see the video, but a couple of the other guys working here did. They say that woman looked like a pop-star wannabe. Did you see it?”

“Yeah.” Way too many times. “I didn’t get a clear look at her face, but she was certainly dressed the part in that curve-hugging red dress and high heels.”

Other than that, Drew didn’t know much about the woman,

other than what he'd either heard through the rodeo grapevine or gathered from social media. Rumor had it her name was Elena, that she knew how to get what she wanted and that she'd set her sights on landing a champion bull rider, even if he was married to someone else.

Now there was another person he'd like to confront—if he ever crossed paths with her.

Kara Lee had told him that the brunette had claimed it was all a mistake, that Kara Lee had it all wrong. But there were plenty of nearby bars and restaurants where that woman and Craig could have met. So there was only one reason for them to be at a hotel.

Nate clucked his tongue and shook his head. “Craig never did deserve a woman like Kara Lee. And she sure as hell didn't deserve the way he treated her.”

“You got that right.”

As they both pondered the truth of that fact, the room grew silent for a couple of beats. Then Sully spoke up and snagged Drew's attention.

“Where did you two fellas meet?” Sully asked.

Drew glanced first at the retired cowboy, then at his buddy. “Nate and I competed in the junior rodeo as kids, and we went to the same high school. But when I left for college, I quit the circuit.”

“I never could figure out why,” Nate said. “Drew was always the guy to beat. He might not look it now, in those fancy duds and shiny new boots, but he's a damn good cowboy.”

Drew shrugged off his friend's compliment, as well as the good-humored ribbing about his success in the business world. "Yep, don't mess with my hair."

They all laughed, but Drew suspected all the rodeo talk struck a tender spot in Nate, who'd suffered a career-ending injury and hadn't had an option when it came to hanging up his spurs.

"Do you guys miss the rodeo?" Sully asked. "I sure did when I had to give it up. But we all have to do that at some point. Our bones don't stay young forever."

Nate shrugged. "Sure, I miss it. I loved the thrill of competition. But now I've got a beautiful wife and baby, and they're more important to me than anything. I actually enjoy being at home these days." He winked at Drew. "Maybe you should consider finding a nice woman and settling down."

"You sound like Kara Lee, but I don't see that lifestyle in my future." He hadn't seen it in his past, either. He and his sister had grown up on their mother's run-down spread outside of Brighton Valley, and the only real memories they'd had consisted of hard work and sparse meals.

"Well, fellas," Sully said, "if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go check the football spreads. A couple of the guys have a Last Man Standing pool, and I'm still in contention."

"Not me," Nate said. "I had to drop out during the second week."

As Sully left the room, chuckling at his good fortune, Nate turned to Drew and pushed away from the table. "I've got to get

back to work. I'll let you get started on that interview process. It'll be lunchtime before we know it."

Speaking of lunch, Drew wondered when the cook would be back to start the food prep. He'd like to see her again. Maybe he'd ask again where they might have crossed paths.

It really didn't matter, he supposed. Yet for some weird reason, it did.

* * *

Lainie had barely gotten to her room when she realized she'd left those darn Dear Debbie letters on the table. Sure, she'd turned them face-side down, but what if...?

Darn it. The last thing in the world she wanted was for someone on the ranch to see them. So, in spite of her plan to avoid Drew Madison while he was visiting, she hurried back to the kitchen.

She'd no more than entered the room when Drew pulled out a chair and took a seat at the table, right in front of those blasted letters. He placed his hand on them, pushing them aside, and her breath caught.

She'd better move quickly. All she needed was for him—or anyone—to learn that she was the new lovelorn columnist, especially since Mr. Carlton wanted Dear Debbie's identity to remain secret. Besides, Lainie wasn't looking forward to adding any failed journalism jobs to her resume.

So she scooped them up, clutching them to her chest. "Let me get rid of this mess for you."

She was about to dash out of the kitchen again when Nate said, "Lainie, you'll need to set out an extra plate for meals for the next few weeks."

"Sure, I can do that. But who...?" She paused, afraid to pose the question when she was already connecting the dots.

"Drew will be staying with us for a little while," Nate said. "He wants to interview the men who live here. Get to know them. Learn their daily routines. I think there's at least one empty cabin that's decent. I'm not sure what's available, but I know Joy gave you a tour of the ranch before she and Sam left on their honeymoon."

If you could call it a tour. Joy had taken Lainie on a quick walk and pointed out a few buildings, none of which she thought would be her concern for the short time she'd be here. But if Drew was going to stay on the Rocking C, she'd take him out to the cabin that was the farthest from the kitchen.

"Of course," she said. "I'll make sure it's aired out and ready for him."

"I hate to inconvenience you," Drew said, his gaze unwavering and kicking her pulse up another notch.

"It's not a problem." She feigned a lighthearted grin and tamped down whatever nervous energy he provoked, either through guilt or fear...or downright sexual attraction. "I'll take care of that cabin right away."

When Nate nodded, Lainie took her chance to escape.

"If you men will excuse me," she said, "I have chores to do."

Then she headed toward the living area, clutching the letters to her chest.

As she reached the doorway, she overheard Nate say, "I've gotta get back to work. Next time you talk to Kara Lee, give her my best."

Kara?

Lainie nearly stumbled at the mention of a name that sounded similar to that of Craig's wife. Then she shook it off.

Boy, she was jumpy today. Nate had said Carolee. Or possibly Carrie Leigh. Either way, they surely weren't the same woman.

Thank goodness for that. If Kara Baxter was Drew Madison's friend, and if he realized who Lainie was and believed what people said about her, then having him on the ranch would be a lot more than an inconvenience.

It would be a humiliating disaster.

* * *

Lainie had no more than returned from Caroline's Diner, where she'd accessed the free Wi-Fi and emailed her first column to the editor, when she spotted Drew and Nate leaving the barn and heading for the house.

Her pride and enthusiasm waned, and her steps, once light and quick, slowed to a near stop. Her first impulse was to slip into the kitchen before they spotted her, but she couldn't very well do that, even if she did have the dinner meal to prepare.

The men waved to her, and she made her way toward them as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do and greeted

them with a forced smile.

“There’s the lady we’ve been looking for,” Nate said. “Have you had a chance to get one of the cabins ready for Drew?”

Oops. Her first priority had been to make her deadline—well before the midnight cutoff. She lifted her hand to her throat and fingered the ribbed neckline on her T-shirt, as well as the bib of her overalls, both of which covered the long, thick scar that ran the length of her sternum. “I haven’t made up the bed yet, but the cabin on the knoll behind the barn will work best. It’s empty, and I’m pretty sure it’s clean.”

“Do you have time to check on it now?” Nate asked. “I’m sure Drew would like to get settled in before dinner, if possible.”

Lainie was already behind schedule, but she couldn’t shirk her responsibilities, especially when this job paid her a lot more than the newspaper did. “Of course. Just give me a minute to get fresh linens and a set of towels from the house.”

“Thanks,” Nate said. “I’d do it myself, but I’m going to be tied up for a while.”

Lainie shot a quick glance at Drew, who was perusing her every bit as intently as he’d done before. Why did he keep doing that?

Her hand began to reach for her chest again, but she let it drop, her fingers trailing along the denim and brushing away imaginary dust. The scar wasn’t visible, and she had to stop reverting back to the old habit she’d once kicked.

“I’ll see you at dinner,” Nate told Drew. “I need to have a chat

with a couple of hands who are at odds with each other. It seems they're both dating the same cocktail waitress at the Stagecoach Inn. I couldn't care less what they do with their time off, but it's begun to affect their work."

"The woes of being a supervisor," Drew said.

Nate rolled his eyes. "That's acting supervisor. And you're right. It's not an easy job, especially with a young and inexperienced crew. Once Sam gets back from his honeymoon, I'm going to turn over my keys to the ranch and hightail it out of here."

"We're looking forward to having you join us at Esteban Enterprises," Drew said.

"I'm glad to hear that, because I can't wait." The guys did some elaborate hand shake and fist pump ritual.

Lainie planned to move on once the honeymooners returned, too. Only problem was, she didn't have another job lined up, like Nate did.

Nate would undoubtedly be successful at Esteban Enterprises, but Lainie'd hate to work for a company that had anything to do with rodeos. Cowboys weren't her thing—except maybe for Sully and the other oldsters. But she'd prefer to never cross paths with the younger ones again.

She glanced at the handsome promoter. Drew might be dressed like a fancy Texas businessman, but his more casual demeanor shouted urban cowboy. So the sooner she could escort him to his temporary quarters and be done with it, the better off

she'd be.

"I'll go inside for the linens," she told him. "Do you have your bags?"

"Just a suitcase and my briefcase. They're in the back of my pickup. It'll only take me a minute."

"Then I'll meet you back here."

Moments later, with her arms laden with freshly laundered sheets, pillowcases and towels, Lainie returned to the yard and found Drew waiting for her. He held a suitcase in one hand and a leather briefcase in the other.

"There it is." She pointed about fifty yards away from the barn, where a lone structure sat. The outside needed a coat or two of paint, but the inside was probably just fine. It looked sturdy enough and should keep him dry and cozy. "It doesn't look like much, but I think you'll be comfortable there."

"I don't require much."

No? She found that hard to believe. She glanced across the driveway at his spanking new Dodge Ram truck, then at his fancy denim jacket, his silver belt buckle and his shiny leather inlaid boots. No, this guy clearly liked the finer things in life.

"This way." She began walking along the graveled path toward the knoll, and he fell into step beside her.

"There's something you should know," she said. "The cell and internet access on the ranch isn't very good. There are some random spots here and there where you might get a bar or two, but it's sketchy at best."

"I won't need to get online right away."

"Okay, but when you do, it might be easier and faster to drive to town. Caroline's Diner offers free Wi-Fi now. And they also have the best desserts you've ever tasted."

"Thanks for the suggestion. I'll keep that in mind."

They turned to the right, following the incline to the cabin. A cool winter breeze kicked up a bit, sending the scent of his cologne her way. It was a clean woodsy fragrance—no doubt expensive—that suited him.

For a moment, her femininity rebelled, scolding her for not applying makeup earlier this morning, for choosing a plain white T-shirt and baggy overalls. But her days of enhancing her curves—whether they could be considered a blessing or a curse—were behind her now.

Yet despite her resolve to remain low-key and unaffected by Drew's presence, she stole a peek at him, hoping he wouldn't notice. But he caught her in the act. Her cheeks warmed, and she quickly looked away, placing her focus on the pathway.

"Have you ever been to Houston?" he asked.

The first image that flashed in her mind was the swanky hotel restaurant, where Craig had invited her for a birthday dinner. But she shook off the memory the best she could. "I went to college in Houston, but I'm originally from Amarillo."

He nodded, as if storing that tidbit of information away to use against her someday. No, come on. That kind of thinking is crazy. But she couldn't help being a wee bit suspicious. For some

reason, he seemed to have locked onto the idea that they'd met before, and they hadn't. She was sure of it.

Still, there seemed to be something familiar about him. Probably his lanky, cowboy swagger.

She cut a sideways glance his way. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious about everyone here."

She reminded herself that she'd have to stay on her toes around him.

They approached the small front porch, which appeared to have a rickety railing. Maybe the cabin wasn't so sturdy after all, but it would have to do.

"This is it," she said, hoping the inside was more appealing than the outside. "I probably should have checked things out before bringing you here."

"All I need is a place to sleep."

Lainie climbed the three steps ahead of him, when a crack and crunch sounded behind her.

"Dammit." Drew lurched forward and, apparently to steady himself, grabbed her hip, sending a spiral of heat to the bone and unbalancing her, too.

She didn't have to turn around to know what had just happened, but she couldn't help herself. Sure enough, he was removing his foot from a big crack in the wood, scratching his fancy boots in the process and banging his fancy leather suitcase against the steps.

He grumbled something she couldn't comprehend, then

removed his hand from her denim-clad hip. Yet her skin sizzled from his touch, tingled from his grip.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize that step was loose."

"The wood's completely rotten."

"I can see that. I know the owners plan to refurbish the cabins before the rodeo comes to town, but I don't think there's a lot of extra cash right now. Are you okay?"

Their gazes locked, and her pulse struck a wacky beat. His features softened, and his annoyance disappeared.

"Yeah, I'm fine. But this porch needs to be fixed pronto."

"I agree, but I think a repair like that'll have to wait."

"Seriously?" He straightened and slowly stepped onto the porch, testing the wood before placing his full weight on it. "Fixing that step can't wait. I might break my leg next time."

She clutched the linens to her chest. "Good point. But...like I said, Nate can't spare the extra cash right now."

He shrugged a single shoulder. "I'll fix it myself. I'm not too bad with a hammer and nails. Tomorrow morning, I'll go to the hardware store and get supplies I'll need to rebuild the broken step." He glanced around. "And the porch. It's just a matter of time before it falls apart, too."

"You're taking it upon yourself to do that?"

"I may as well pay for my keep."

"That'd be nice of you. And appreciated." For some reason, she hadn't expected him to actually do any physical labor. He didn't look like the kind of man who'd risk getting blisters or

building up a sweat.

Lainie turned back to face the entrance and shuffled the linen to one arm. She reached for the knob and opened the door. As she crossed the threshold, into the tidy and modestly furnished interior, she caught a whiff of must and dust. “I guess we’d better open some windows and air it out.”

“That’s not a problem.” Drew followed her inside. He set his suitcase on the hardwood floor near the small green plaid sofa and his briefcase on the oak coffee table.

Lainie carried the linens to the bed and placed them on the bare mattress. Then she took the towels and washcloths to the bathroom. When she returned to the bedroom, she found Drew opening the window. He looked especially nice from the backside—broad shoulders, narrow hips...

Enough of that. Drew Madison was a cowboy—fancy duds or not. And what was worse, Lainie hadn’t lucked out when it came to assessing the characters of men she found attractive.

“The pillows, blanket and spread must be in the closet,” she said.

“I can take care of that. I’m sure you have other things to do.”

She had a ton to do before her day ended. When she’d checked her email at Caroline’s, Mr. Carlton had forwarded the next batch of Dear Debbie letters. But Nate had asked her to help their guest get settled. It wouldn’t be right to take off and leave him on his own.

“No, I—” She’d just slid open the small closet door, when a

brown furry streak jumped from the top shelf, landing on her head. She screamed and swiped at her hair to no avail. The damned creature dropped to her chest and scampered under the bib of her overalls. She shrieked again, and Drew was at her side in an instant.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Are you okay?”

“No!” She continued to scream and shudder. She hopped up and down in an attempt to dislodge it, but it scurried around her waist and into her pant leg. She grabbed Drew’s arm as if he could save her.

His brow furrowed, his expression one of concern. “What? What is it?”

“It’s a mouse. And it ran down my...” Oh, my God. It was still in there, trying to find a hiding place.

A childhood memory replayed in her mind—the abandoned warehouse in their run-down neighborhood, the innocent game of hide-and-seek, the rat’s nest that turned into a little girl’s worst nightmare...

Lainie let go of Drew, who wasn’t any help, unhooked the overall buckles and shimmied out of the baggy britches until they bagged at her ankles. She struggled to kick off her laced shoes.

“How can I help?” he asked.

If she wasn’t in the midst of a mind-boggling crisis, she might have offered a suggestion. But all she could think to do was to scream yet again.

The nasty little creature was burrowing into the folds of the

fabric, squirming to escape almost as frantically as she was. When she finally tugged off her second shoe and stepped out of the overalls, she turned to Drew and pointed at the pile of denim. "Get it. Take it outside."

Drew bent to do as she'd instructed, but not before the mangy little beast took the opportunity to zip under the bed.

Lainie shuddered and straightened, then she turned to him.

He stood there stoically, his gaze on her. Apparently, he didn't give a fig about the mouse that could easily burrow into his bed tonight.

He studied her for a couple of beats, then he looked away.

It took her those same beats and another to realize she was standing before him in her stocking feet, wearing only a baggy T-shirt and a pair of pink panties. And skimpy ones at that.

Her cheeks heated and her lips parted. Oh, no. Now what?

Drew snatched a folded sheet from the mattress and held it out to her.

She grabbed it and rushed to the bathroom, but it wasn't the blasted mouse she hoped to escape this time. It was the dashing cowboy who'd seen more of her than she'd wanted to reveal.

Chapter Three

Now that the crisis was over, some men might have found Lainie's reaction to a panicked field mouse a bit comical, but Drew had been too focused on her shapely, bare legs and those pink lacy panties. He hadn't realized what she'd been hiding behind all that denim, but certainly not curves that were that sexy.

Most women would flaunt them, but apparently Lainie didn't.

When the bathroom door creaked open, she came out with the sheet wrapped around her waist. Her cheeks were flushed a deep pink, and her brow was creased in worry. She scanned the room. "Is it gone?"

No, he suspected the critter was still under the bed and probably suffering from a massive coronary. He didn't want to lie, but neither did he want to risk having her freak out again. "You're safe."

Drew thought about making light of the situation and her reaction, but she was undoubtedly embarrassed by it. And he couldn't help sympathizing.

She pointed to the pile of denim on the floor. "Would you please shake those out, then give them to me?"

"Sure." He picked up the overalls, made an effort to examine them carefully, then gave them a vigorous shake before handing them to her. "Here you go."

It was a shame she was going to hide behind baggy clothes again.

She held the sheet in place with one hand and clutched the overalls with the other. Yet she stood her ground, her cheeks rosy, and gave a little shrug. "In case you hadn't figured it out, I hate mice."

"Apparently so." His grin broadened to a full-on smile. "But just for future reference, it wasn't going to eat you in a single bite."

She mumbled something directed at him, clicked her tongue then returned to the bathroom.

When the bathroom door swung open again, and she walked out wearing those damned overalls, he felt compelled to tease her. Instead, he bit his tongue. But he couldn't wipe the smile off his face.

"I realize you found this funny," she said, "and I admit that I overreacted."

"No," he lied. "Some people have an aversion to things like mice, bugs and snakes." He took a seat on the bed.

"And I'm one of them. But you see, one day, when my twin sister and I were playing, we had a bad experience with rats. So that came into play just now."

"You have a twin?"

She paused a beat, and her eye twitched, just as it had a few minutes ago, when he'd asked her if she'd ever been to Houston. "Yes, I do."

"Identical?"

"No. People used to think we were, especially since there's a strong family resemblance and we were the same size and had the same coloring. But no, we're fraternal twins."

Had Drew run into her sister before? If so, that could be the reason Lainie seemed familiar.

"Where does your sister live?" he asked.

"I'm...not sure. I haven't seen her since... Well, it's been a while."

He was tempted to ask why, but he suspected they'd had a falling-out of some kind. And he'd had enough drama within his own family to last a lifetime.

"Anyway," Lainie said, "I need to go back to the house. I only have an hour to get dinner on the table."

"You sure you're okay?"

"I'll live. I'm just glad you reminded me that the darned critter wasn't able to eat me in a single bite." She smiled and winked. Then she bit down on her bottom lip. "Hey, do me a favor, please. Don't tell the guys about this."

"My lips are sealed. It'll be our little secret." This time, he winked. "Thanks for helping me get settled."

"And for providing you with a little entertainment? You're welcome. I was just doing my job. Or trying to, anyway." Then she headed for the door.

He nearly added, And thanks for the lovely vision I'll never get out of my head.

* * *

Lainie had never been so embarrassed in her life. She couldn't believe she'd screamed like a wild woman and stripped down to her panties in front of a virtual stranger—and a handsome one at that.

So much for getting a fresh start in Brighton Valley. If word of this got out, she'd have to move again. Fortunately, Drew had been nice about the whole thing, but he must think she was a nut job, which she probably was. What normal woman would have

reacted like that? And all because of a tiny little mouse.

She blew out an exasperated sigh. As much as she'd like to avoid Drew for the rest of her life—or at least, for the duration of his stay—she was going to have to face him again this evening, at the dinner table. And speaking of dinner, she didn't have a clue what she was going to fix. She'd been so focused on getting her column turned in on time that she'd neglected to do any prep work. And now she'd have to regroup and think of something that was quick and easy.

She had ground beef in the fridge. Hamburgers with all the fixings wouldn't be too difficult to pull off. By the time she'd gotten across the yard and near the house, she had a menu planned. Thank goodness for the canned beans in the pantry and the ice cream she'd stored in the freezer.

She'd no more than reached the back porch of the main ranch house when she spotted Sully and Rex, another old-timer, sitting outside, swaying away the afternoon in rocking chairs. They were watching—or rather critiquing—a younger cowboy working with a horse in the corral.

“Damn fool kid,” Rex said. “Someone had better fire his ass before he gets himself killed.”

“You got that right.” Sully slowly shook his head.

“Aw, hell.” Rex got to his feet and reached for his cane. “I’m going to find Nate. This is crazy. That kid shouldn’t be left to work on his own.”

Rex had no more than taken a single step when he spotted

Lainie and tipped his worn cowboy hat at her. "Little lady. If you'll excuse me?"

"Of course," she said.

Rex grumbled something under his breath as he took off in search of the acting foreman.

"So," Sully said. "I see you're finally home after your trip to town."

"Yes, I got back a little while ago. I've been helping Drew get settled in the cabin on the knoll."

Sully glanced at his wristwatch. "Looks like it's about time for dinner."

Yes, and if she didn't get inside quickly, she wouldn't have it on the table by five o'clock. Joy had warned her that the men were in the habit of eating at set times—and not one minute later.

"I know you're probably busy," Sully said, "but I thought about something after we discussed your friend's problem."

For a moment, the only problem Lainie could remember was her own. What normal woman dropped her pants in front of a stranger, and all because of a tiny mouse? But Sully hadn't been privy to that secret. At least, not yet.

"What problem is that?" she asked.

"You know," he said, as he got up from his rocker and followed her into the kitchen. "The friend who wrote you the letter about having her heart broken."

"Oh, yes."

"I thought about something else you can tell her," Sully said.

Too late. The column was already in Mr. Carlton's inbox. But Lainie wasn't about to turn down any sage advice she might be able to use later. "What's that?"

"You can't expect someone else to make you happy. You'll only end up miserable if you do because the time will come when the two of you will part ways, through death or divorce or whatever."

Wasn't that the truth? Time and again since childhood, Lainie had learned that lesson the hard way. She never knew her mother, and her father died before she and her twin entered kindergarten. Three years later, her grandmother followed suit and left them wards of the state. Then Erica was adopted and snatched away. Even while Lainie was in the hospital for her heart surgery, the nurses kept changing, thanks to their varied shifts.

So if there was anything to count on, it was that life was unpredictable. And the only one who could make her happy was herself.

She'd thought her luck might have changed when she met Craig, but she'd never expected him to make her happy. She had, however, expected him to be honest with her.

"When my wife died," Sully said, "I missed her so much. For a while, I thought my life was over. I couldn't see a purpose for it after she was gone. But my buddies stepped in and gave me a kick in the backside. They told me to quit feeling sorry for myself and to focus on others."

Lainie opened the commercial-sized refrigerator and pulled

out a huge package of ground beef. “What did you do?”

“I volunteered at a local soup kitchen. And it made all the difference in the world. Tell your friend to find something to do that’s bigger than herself. Once she gets off the pity train, she’ll be surprised at how good she’ll feel.”

“More wise advice,” Lainie said. And more fodder for a future column.

“You might want to give her some options, like volunteering at the animal shelter or collecting blankets and toiletry items for the homeless.”

Actually, that’s exactly what Lainie would do. She’d go to the library and do some online research about the needs in the community. Then, when she found an opportunity to make a suggestion like that to someone, she’d have a good-size list of volunteer possibilities to provide as a wrap to the column.

“That’s a great idea, Sully. I’ll make that suggestion the next time I talk to my friend.” She offered him a warm, appreciative smile, dropped the meat on the counter then opened the pantry and pulled out several packages of buns. “Thanks again for the advice.”

“Sure. Anytime. Say, you need any help?”

Boy, did she. And on so many levels. But he was talking about dinner—and the need for her to get it on the table by five. “Sure, would you mind firing up the gas grill?”

“I’d be delighted.” Sully went outside to the deck.

Before forming the meat into patties, Lainie washed her hands

at the sink, then dried them with the dish towel that had been resting on the counter. She couldn't help glancing out the kitchen window at the cabin on the knoll. Her hand lifted, and she fingered the length of the scar that hid under the cotton and denim.

She'd just about reached her wit's end when it came to dealing with handsome men, especially those who left her feeling guilty or embarrassed or lacking in any way. Fortunately, she'd be moving on again soon. Only this time, when she chose a new job, it might be best to consider one at a convent.

* * *

Lainie had just finished wiping down the countertops and putting away the last of the breakfast dishes when the ranch telephone rang. She snatched the receiver from its wall-mounted cradle. The cord, stretched from years of use, dangled to her knees. "Rocking Chair Ranch. This is Lainie."

"Hey, kid."

She was more than a little surprised to hear Mr. Carlton's voice on the other end.

"I knew you could do it," he said, his tone almost jubilant. "That column you sent to me yesterday was great. In fact, it was everything I'd hoped it would be."

Thank goodness. Or rather, in this case, thank Sully. Either way, she was relieved to know she'd hit the mark. "Thank you, Mr. Carlton."

"You mentioned the internet service wasn't very good at the

ranch, so I hope you received the additional letters I sent. I hadn't gotten your column yet, but I had a good feeling."

"Yes, I did. I had to go into town to find Wi-Fi so I could send it to you. And while I was there, I checked my email and downloaded them onto my laptop." She hadn't looked at them yet. She was waiting until she found both the time and the enthusiasm to tackle the chore. But her boss didn't need to know that. "I'll read them over the weekend."

"Good, but you might want to get started on them right away. I'll need your next column turned in by Monday at noon."

"So soon?" Monday was only a few days away. She leaned against the wall and wrapped the curly phone cord around her index finger. "I thought my deadlines were on Wednesdays."

"Now that we're back on track, I'll need more time to review your column."

"I'm afraid I'm not following you."

"When the last Dear Debbie quit without notice, I had to find a replacement and make adjustments. The column comes out every Friday, so I pushed your deadline back to give you time to write it. But that meant I had to review it quickly. I'll admit that your column isn't a huge priority to me, especially since the readership isn't that big. But the fans we do have are very loyal. And they're vocal."

Lainie didn't doubt that the lovelorn column was at the bottom of the editor's priority list. Not that she knew what was at the top. She had no idea what the Brighton Valley residents expected

to see in terms of news and special interest stories. At least, not yet. She'd have a much better idea after she researched her new community and the various organizations needing volunteers the next time she went to town. She'd even take her camera with her. Who knew what photo op she might find? Or what interesting tidbit she might learn. There were sure to be plenty of people or activities going on that she could use for a future article.

Mr. Carlton cleared his throat. "A Monday deadline isn't going to be a problem for you, is it?"

She'd wrapped the phone cord so tightly around her finger that it had turned red, so she loosened it as she attempted to reassure her boss. "No, not at all. I'll get my next column to you with time to spare." Now all she had to do was to reassure herself that she'd come through for him again.

And to pull that off, she'd have to find Sully. Maybe she could bribe him with brownies.

"That's just the kind of response I like in my staff," Mr. Carlton said. "My full-time staff."

He didn't have to say any more. If Lainie wanted a bigger and more important position at The Brighton Valley Gazette, she'd need to keep her self-doubt at bay.

"You won't be disappointed, Mr. Carlton."

"We'll see about that." He muttered something under his breath—or possibly to someone else. "Listen, Debbie—or rather, Lainie. I have a meeting and need to get ready for it. I'll let you go so you can get started on the next column. I can't wait to see

it.” Then he hung up without saying goodbye.

Lainie completely freed her finger from the cord, released her death grip on the receiver and returned it to the wall mount. Then she straightened her stance and blew out a ragged sigh.

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