

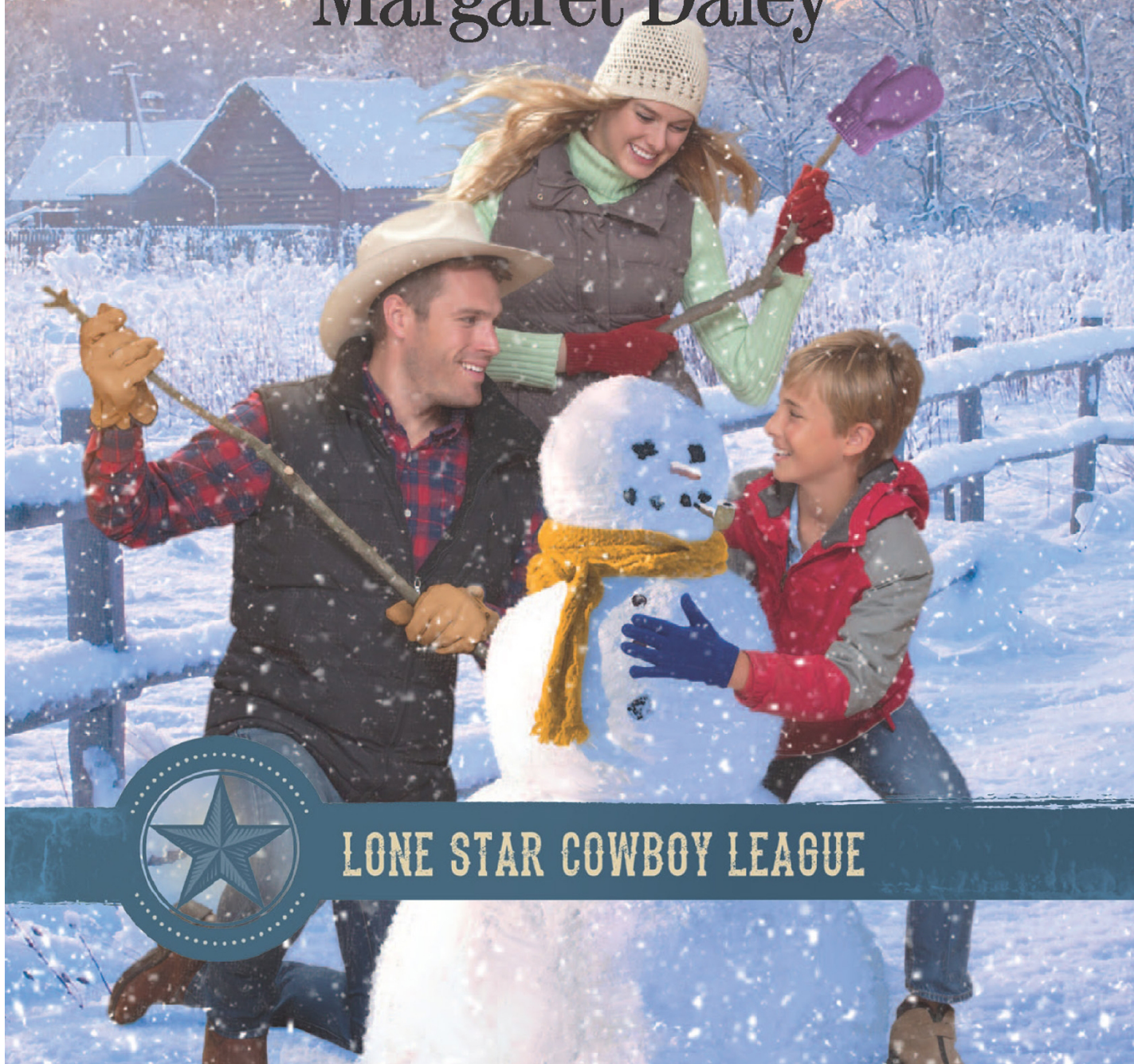
HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

The Cowboy's Texas Family

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

Margaret Daley



LONE STAR COWBOY LEAGUE

Margaret Daley

The Cowboy's Texas Family

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From Cowboy to Father Figure Rancher Nick McGarrett wants to help orphaned ten-year-old Corey Phillips, the brother of his late comrade. But he's not fit to be a father—not with his troubled past. Thankfully, the child finds a home at the Lone Star Cowboy League Boys Ranch, where Nick volunteers. When wealthy newcomer Darcy Hill discovers she's Corey's cousin, she hopes to eventually take him in. Nick and Darcy couldn't be more opposite—or more drawn to each other. But for Darcy, raising Corey in her hometown means leaving Texas...and Nick. It'll take a special little boy to show these two grown-ups that the key to forging a new future is being together.

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"How about the boys ranch for Corey?" Darcy asked.

"I know they have room for one more boy," Nick said, "and I'd much rather see Corey there, but I'm not sure it'll happen. I volunteer at the boys ranch, and it would be great for Corey."

Darcy wasn't surprised that Nick would volunteer there. In the short time she'd been with him, she saw a man of action and heart. "Then I'll pray that something is done for Corey."

Nick looked away. "In my experience He hasn't helped much."

There was something in Nick's voice that touched Darcy. Who did he turn to when he was in trouble or upset?

She started to say something, but the tense set of his jaw and rigid posture indicated this wasn't a good time. He wouldn't hear her.

She didn't want to leave Haven until something was done for Corey. How could she walk away from a child in need?

And how could she walk away from Nick McGarrett?

* * *

Lone Star Cowboy League: Boys Ranch

Bighearted ranchers in small-town Texas

[The Rancher's Texas Match](#) by Brenda Minton October 2016

[The Ranger's Texas Proposal](#) by Jessica Keller November 2016

[The Nanny's Texas Christmas](#) by Lee Tobin McClain December 2016

The Cowboy's Texas Family by Margaret Daley

January 2017

[The Doctor's Texas Baby](#) by Deb Kastner February 2017

[The Rancher's Texas Twins](#) by Allie Pleiter March 2017

[Dear Reader,](#)

I wanted to thank the authors I had the pleasure of working with on this second Lone Star Cowboy League continuity as well as Shana Asaro, our editor on this project. I worked on the first one and had as much fun with this one as I did with that first LSCL series.

I'm a retired teacher, and I loved working and helping children. That's what this series is about. There are some kids who need extra love and attention because of what they are dealing with. Corey was one of those and got the help he needed. Nick was also a troubled child while growing up, but he wasn't fortunate enough to receive the support he needed and his past affected his present. He learned he couldn't run from it. Forgetting the past wasn't easy until he dealt with his emotions concerning it. He used what he'd learned growing up to help Corey and that in turn also made Nick a stronger person.

I love hearing from readers. You can contact me at margaretdaley@gmail.com or at P. O. Box 2074, Tulsa, OK 74101. You can also learn more about my books at www.margaretdaley.com. I have a newsletter that you can sign up for on my website.

Take care,

Margaret

MARGARET DALEY, an award-winning author of ninety books (five million sold worldwide), has been married for over forty years and is a firm believer in romance and love. When she isn't traveling, she's writing love stories, often with a suspense thread, and corralling her three

cats, who think they rule her household. To find out more about Margaret, visit her website at margaretdaley.com.

The Cowboy's Texas Family
Margaret Daley



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For if you forgive men their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

—Matthew 6:14

To my editor, Melissa Endlich. Thank you.

Special thanks and acknowledgment
are given to Margaret Daley for her contribution to the
Lone Star Cowboy League: Boys Ranch miniseries.

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[Chapter One](#)

Nick McGarrett marched into Fletcher Snowden Phillips's law office in Haven, Texas. It was time the man stepped up and helped a member of his family. Fletcher's secretary looked up and frowned. As Nick crossed to her desk, he glanced at his mud-splattered jeans and boots. When he'd received a tearful call from Corey Phillips, a ten-year-old second cousin of Fletcher's, Nick had come straight from replacing a section of a fence on his ranch.

Nick owed Corey's older brother, Doug. When they'd gone on their last mission together, Nick had promised his combat buddy that after he left the service he would watch out for Corey until Doug could. At the time Nick had thought it would be only a few months until Doug returned home. His friend was killed in that mission by a sniper. Young Corey looked like Doug, who'd always had Nick's back when they had gone on assignments together.

Nick fixed his gaze on Nancy Collins, hoping it would convey his determination. "I need to see Fletcher now." He'd lost all patience with the man.

Both of the secretary's eyebrows rose, and her chin came up a notch. "Do you have an appointment?"

He peered at the closed door to Fletcher's inner office—shut tightly like the lawyer's heart. Although she probably knew the answer, Nick said, "No."

"I can schedule one for next week. He's leaving soon."

"That's okay." Nick tipped the brim of his brown Stetson and then pivoted and strode into the corridor.

He planted himself against the wall, reclining back with his arms crossed. He was going to talk to the man one way or another. It was in times like this that Nick wished he had enough money to help Fletcher's cousin financially. All he could do was be there for the ten-year-old who lived twenty miles away in a small town on the other side of Waco.

Today Corey had thought his dad was dead. Nick tried to go over to the small, dilapidated house whenever the boy called. If he couldn't, Nick would call Mrs. Scott, who lived next door, to help. Today he'd been worried he wouldn't make it in time if something worse had happened to Ned Phillips than drinking too much alcohol. Thankfully the older woman had stayed with Corey, assuring the child that his father would wake up, which he finally did. Truth be told, Corey shouldn't even be living with his alcoholic father, who left the child practically to raise himself. Nick had been there as a kid and knew how hard that was.

The door to the office opened, and Fletcher came out.

Nick pushed himself off the wall and stepped in the man's path. "We need to talk."

"I don't have time."

Fletcher, tall with an imposing paunch, tried to skirt around Nick. He didn't weigh as much as the lawyer, but his body was muscular from hard work. Fletcher's idea of exercise was walking to and from his luxury car. Nick blocked his path. "Make time."

Fletcher scowled. "Is this about Corey again?"

"Yes. You're his closest relative. If you don't want to take the boy and raise him, then at least help Ned buy food and clothing." Nick nearly choked on the first part of the sentence. Fletcher wasn't good father material either.

"I'm not giving Ned a cent. All he would do is buy more liquor. I'm a bachelor. I always have been. I wouldn't know the first thing about raising a child. Check with Family and Protective Services. That's their job." Fletcher quickly sidestepped and charged down the hall, leaving Nick fuming.

As if he hadn't tried contacting the authorities. The underfunded and overworked Family and Protective Services had more urgent cases to deal with.

Nick took several deep, calming breaths and then followed Fletcher outside to the parking lot. The wind held a fierce chill even for early January. As the lawyer drove away, Nick hurried his pace and welcomed what warmth still lingered in the cab of his old truck.

When Nick had first returned to Haven after being in the army, serving overseas in a war zone, Fletcher had said the same thing—that it was the county's problem, not Fletcher's.

Painful memories from the war zone inundated Nick. It had been over a year since he'd returned home to Haven. Too many comrades had died. He didn't understand why there was so much death and hatred. At first he had prayed, but when he lost one friend while Nick was trying to save his life, he'd stopped talking to God. The Lord obviously wasn't listening.

As Nick left Main Street and the small downtown area, he passed Fletcher parking his car in front of his large antebellum home a few miles outside of Haven. The large three-story house overshadowed everyone else's place nearby. Although he came from a family with a long ranching history, Fletcher didn't live on more than two acres of land. According to Fletcher, ranching was manual labor and beneath him.

The sun near the western horizon sent up streaks of yellow, orange and rose through the darkening blue sky. Even though sunset was less than a half hour away, Nick wore his sunglasses to keep the glare from impeding his driving. Through the last burst of brightness, he glimpsed a car coming toward him. The driver maneuvered it to the shoulder of the two-lane highway and then came to a stop.

As Nick approached, he eased up on the gas. The other car's emergency lights began flashing. A blond-haired woman opened the car door, swung her long legs around and stood. Standing partially on the road in four-inch heels, she glanced at him as he passed her. He made a U-turn and parked not a yard behind her. The chilly wind blew even stronger than before. The moisture-laden air would produce snow later tonight.

Nick climbed from his truck and strolled toward the lady using her expensive sports car as a shield from the cold northern blast.

"Not for two hours? It's getting dark." Her throaty voice with a Southern drawl rose in panic. "I'm in the middle of nowhere." She paused while the person on the other end said something and then she sighed heavily. "Fine. Seven thirty or eight." She disconnected and jammed her phone into her leather coat's pocket.

Her gaze clashed with his, and she backed up against her car door. "I know how to defend myself, mister."

"Against what? The cold? That short leather jacket won't keep you warm." His look skimmed her length, taking in her bare legs and the skirt that came to her knees. She had to be passing through. She had city gal stamped all over and, by the looks of her Corvette, was rich too. It wasn't that he thought anyone would harm her, but he couldn't leave her stranded for two hours waiting for a ride from whomever she was talking to.

"When I left Mobile this morning, it was a balmy sixty-five degrees and climbing to eighty until I began heading north in Houston."

"A cold front is pushing through. If you don't want to wait, I can drive you to Haven, the nearest town. I know Slim, who owns the garage. Or if you ran out of gas, I can bring you back some. You're only five miles from Haven."

She straightened. "I didn't run out of gas. I have over half a tank. My check-engine light came on when I left Interstate 45. I was praying I could make it to Haven without a problem."

"Haven?" Why? Who was she visiting? She'd fit in about as well as a fox in a hen house.

"I like a small town. Waco is too big."

"And you're from Mobile?" The last time he checked, Mobile was classified as a city.

"South at Gulf Shores. The pace is a little quieter. I noticed you were heading out of town. I'd hate to take you out of your way." The woman hugged her arms close to her body while she pretended she wasn't freezing.

"I don't live too far from here. A few extra miles won't make any difference." His horses could wait, and after he dropped her off, he'd call Corey and decide if he needed to see him in person tonight or if he could wait until tomorrow.

"I hate to be a bother."

In a short time darkness had totally blanketed the landscape, the only illumination coming from his headlights. He didn't want to leave her alone on the road. There was little crime in the area, but if something happened to her, he'd have a hard time forgiving himself. "It's up to you. But after sundown, it's going to get a lot colder fast." He held out his hand. "By the way, I'm Nick McGarrett."

The woman shook it. "I'm Darcy Hill. And if you're sure you have the time to go back into town, then I'd appreciate a ride to the garage. I have a reservation at the Blue Bonnet Inn."

Reservations? The inn was more of a bed-and-breakfast and did a brisk business in the spring, summer and fall. It was well-known in the state for its hospitality and luxurious accommodations, but in the winter it might be half full at its best. "It's not far from Slim's, right off the main street. You might want to get your luggage. Slim will have to tow your car to Haven, and since it's close to quitting time, he probably won't take a look under the hood till morning."

"After being on the road eleven hours, all I want to do is eat and sleep. I can call my auto service back and cancel if you're sure."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll put your luggage in the back of my truck."

She withdrew her key fob from her pocket and clicked it. The trunk popped open. "I also have some pieces in the passenger seat."

Nick stared at the back area of her sports car, every inch crammed with her belongings. While he emptied the trunk—two suitcases and some soft bags—Darcy took out a couple more pieces from the front seat. "How long are you staying?"

"Not sure yet. For a while."

Nick carried the luggage to his truck. Who makes plans to come to Haven for an undetermined amount of time in the winter? The last city gal who came to Haven a while back was now buddy-buddy with Fletcher. They didn't need another troublemaker like Avery Culpepper in town, even if Darcy Hill was pretty and sure to turn men's heads.

* * *

Darcy settled herself in the passenger seat of the man's beat-up truck, called her auto service and then put her cell phone in her purse. She patted the soft leather, reassuring herself that her handgun was still inside. Her dad had insisted she bring it on the long road trip. She was twenty-seven and lived in her own house not far from her parents' estate in Alabama, but they still worried about her. She was their only child, adopted when she was a few weeks old. In her heart, Mom and Dad were her true parents. They had even supported her trip to Haven.

"Do you know anyone around here?" the cowboy asked as he started his pickup and pulled onto the highway.

"No." Which was true, but she was hoping to get to know her biological father. She wasn't sure whether she would approach him or not—especially since her birth mother had made it clear that she didn't want to meet Darcy. Being rejected by her twice had been a blow. She didn't want another rejection.

"Most people have a reason to visit Haven."

She warmed her hands near a heat vent in the dashboard that put out an inadequate stream of hot air. "I'm not most people. When I was a child, I wanted to visit every state. I've been in Texas before, but it's so big I felt I needed to divide it into sections to do it justice." All technically true. As they neared Haven, she stared out the side window at the lights from a large antebellum house she knew belonged to her biological father. The private investigator who had located Fletcher Phillips had given her a photo of the man's house, along with other pictures of him. She swung her gaze to Nick, the dim interior lights casting his ruggedly handsome features into the shadows but not concealing the strong slope of his jawline and the broad width of his shoulders. "Now that place makes me feel right at home. Who lives there?"

Nick tensed, his shoulders squaring. "Fletcher Phillips."

His stern tone sent up red flags. "I get the impression you don't care for the man. What does he do for a living?" She already knew that but didn't want to appear suspicious.

"A lawyer," he spat out as though it were a dirty word.

"You don't like lawyers or just Fletcher Phillips?" A hard edge entered her words. She'd met her share of people who didn't like any attorney until they needed one. She worked as one for Legal Aid.

“Not this one. He butts his nose in a situation he shouldn’t but ignores family members he should take care of.”

Darcy swallowed hard, her hand curling around the door handle. Had she made a mistake looking for Fletcher Phillips? Or catching a ride with Nick McGarrett? “Family members?”

Nick slid a glance at her. “You caught me at the wrong time. I just had a run-in with the man over helping his cousins.”

Although she couldn’t see his face completely, she sensed a softness in his expression. “Cousins?” Before coming to Haven, she’d investigated only her biological father, not anyone else who might be kin to her in this area. Now she wished she had dug a little deeper. She was curious about these other relatives. “Why do they need help?”

“Ned Phillips, Fletcher’s cousin, has no business being a father, especially to a young boy.”

Her curiosity grew. “Why?” Maybe she should leave now. No, she hadn’t come all this way to leave because of Nick’s opinion of Fletcher. There were always two sides to a situation. But she made a note to be more cautious about approaching Fletcher.

“Ned has a son, who he neglects—even leaves him alone, usually to go out to drink. Corey is only ten and shouldn’t have to take care of himself. I’ve tried to get Fletcher to at least help the boy.”

“And this Fletcher won’t?” Obviously it had been a good choice to come to town and scout the situation out first before she said anything to Fletcher Phillips—if she ever did. She wanted information, not a father. She already had a wonderful dad who loved her.

“It’s not his problem, according to Fletcher.”

So Fletcher doesn’t care about family? Darcy’s stomach tightened into a knot. She’d known from an early age that she was adopted but always felt as if she were Mom and Dad’s real daughter. They had never treated her any other way. So why set herself up for another disappointment by her birth parents?

“But Corey is your problem?” A lump lodged in her throat as she said the boy’s name. She’d dealt with enough legal cases that involved children, and she always fought for what was right for them. One day she hoped to have her own kids, and she wouldn’t abandon them the way her biological parents had. Although she had had a wonderful childhood with a loving, caring mom and dad, it looked like it could have been just as easily the opposite if she hadn’t been put up for adoption.

For a long moment silence reigned in the truck. Then the blare of a country and western song resounded through the cab.

Nick glanced down to see who was calling, and then he pulled over to the side of the road and answered it. “Mrs. Scott, is something wrong?”

The worry in his voice drew Darcy’s full attention. As he listened to the person who had called him, his features slashed into a frown. Something bad had happened. Who was Mrs. Scott?

“I’ll be right there. I’m glad the police are at Ned’s.”

When he disconnected, Darcy asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Corey is missing. I need to go and help look for him.”

Her cousin was missing! She couldn’t walk away from an opportunity to meet and help a relative, especially a ten-year-old boy. And it didn’t hurt that she would be with Nick McGarrett, an attractive—and caring—cowboy. “Let’s go. I’ll help.”

Chapter Two

“Why do you want to help?” This was the last thing he thought Darcy Hill would offer. “I’m only ten minutes away from the Blue Bonnet Inn. You said you were tired and hungry.” Nick gripped the steering wheel and stared at Darcy in the dim light from his dashboard. He couldn’t believe he’d told her so much about Corey’s situation, but after his meeting with Fletcher today, frustration churned his gut.

“Because a child is missing on a cold winter’s night. You’ll need everyone you can get to search for him. I couldn’t go to the inn without trying to help.”

The worry in her expression lured Nick. She showed more feelings toward an unknown kid than Ned did toward his son. Her caring nature appealed to him and made it easy to talk to her. "Corey lives in Dry Gulch. It might take a long time if we can't find him right away."

"I don't care. A child is in trouble."

Her words touched a cold place in Nick's heart, forged from years living with an alcoholic father like Corey's, and calmed his earlier anger at Fletcher. "You can't go looking for him in what you're wearing." He couldn't believe he was arguing with her about helping Corey. She was right. In the dark, it would be doubly hard to find the child. Did he have a coat on? Did he run away or had something else happened?

"I have some boots in one of my bags. It won't take me long to change into them." She gave him a smile. "I should have when I stopped in Houston and heard the weather report about the cold front moving through this part of Texas."

"Fine. I can't guarantee how long this will take." Nick made another U-turn and headed out of town. He handed her his cell phone. "Slim's number is in my contact list. You can call him and have him tow your car to his garage, and then you can check with him tomorrow morning about what's wrong with it." He shot her another look before pressing on the accelerator. "That way your car will be moved off the shoulder of the highway."

"Thanks. Do you have the number for the Blue Bonnet Inn? I'd like to tell the owner I'll be late."

"Under Carol Thornton. I've got to warn you, she'll ask a ton of questions about why you'll be late."

"I guess she'll think it's strange I'm helping out."

"No. She's one who will jump in when someone is in trouble, whether she knows the person or not. If I had the time, I would recruit her and a few others. Most townspeople are like family." He increased his speed outside of Haven, pushing the limit.

"Except for Fletcher Phillips?"

"You pick up fast. I won't bother calling him to let him know Corey is missing." Nick tossed a glance at Darcy as a car came toward his truck. Her blond hair hung in thick waves about her shoulders while her blue eyes held a frown. "I hope you have a hat to wear."

"A cowboy one like yours?"

"Nope. A warm one like a beanie."

"Yes, I do, and gloves." She studied the list of contacts on his phone and then connected with one of them.

While she called Slim and Carol, Nick focused on the last twelve miles to Corey's house. The unknown ate at Nick the whole way to Dry Gulch. Nick kept replaying his promise to Doug to keep his little brother safe. When he made a promise, he kept it. What if he couldn't now?

When Darcy finished talking to Carol, she gave him his phone back. "You're right. She drilled me with questions, most of which I couldn't answer. I have a feeling when I finally show up at the inn, I'll have to tell her everything we did."

"I guarantee you will. Carol is like a mother hen."

"Does she have children of her own?"

"No, but not from want of trying. It's a shame. She would have been a great mother."

"I'm assuming Corey doesn't have a mother around since you've only mentioned his dad. Do you know what happened to her?"

"She died years ago."

"That's sad." Her voice caught on her words, and Nick chanced another look at Darcy. Her forehead knit into a thoughtful expression. "Did Mrs. Scott tell you the details of Corey's disappearance?" she finally asked, her tone still emotion-filled.

“Not a lot. Usually Corey will call me, and we’ll talk. Mrs. Scott lives next door to Corey and keeps an eye out for the child. All I really know is that Corey is gone and a deputy sheriff is at Ned’s house.” No doubt Ned had gone out to get some more liquor.

“So he was staying home alone?”

“Most likely.” His own feelings warred inside him—from anger at himself for not going earlier, to fear. Apprehension won out. Why didn’t Corey call him again instead of running away? What if he couldn’t find the boy? “I don’t know anything else. Mrs. Scott didn’t go into a lot of details. The neighbors are forming a search party to help the deputy. We can join them.” Hopefully he’d find out more when he arrived in Dry Gulch. Better yet, maybe Corey was already home and safe.

Nearing the town, Nick slanted another glance toward Darcy, her hands clasped together as though she were praying. It wouldn’t help. He’d tried that. Nick had given up on the Lord answering his prayers. At least Ned so far hadn’t physically harmed Corey, but neglect of a child was a form of abuse. Corey hungered for love and acceptance.

“We’re almost there. Ned and I have exchanged a few words concerning Corey, but nothing will keep me away. I promised Doug, Corey’s older brother, that I would watch out for him. I just wanted to let you know things could get tense.”

“Does Ned know about what Doug asked you to do?”

Nick turned down a street on the outskirts of Dry Gulch, a town about the size of Haven. “Yes, and he isn’t too happy about that.” He pulled behind a long line of cars crammed into every parking spot available. A few floodlights illuminated the area as though it were daytime. “It looks like a lot of people are here. Good. Corey could be in town somewhere, in the woods or on a ranch nearby. Lots of hiding places, and with the darkness he’ll be harder to find.”

“So you think he’s hiding, not taken by someone?” Darcy asked as she opened the passenger door.

“More likely hiding or running away.” He hoped. The alternative was even worse. When he hopped down and looked over the hood of his truck at Darcy, he was glad she’d come with him. Although he barely knew Darcy, her presence comforted him. Her immediate response to his news earlier had been to help. There was more to her than too many clothes and shoes. She might come from money, but she didn’t act like a spoiled socialite.

He waited for her to join him and then he made his way toward the group of people on the front lawn of Corey’s home. Mrs. Scott stood near Ned, talking to him as more neighbors joined the throng. The furious expression on Ned’s face alerted Nick that the man probably hadn’t been the one who’d called the sheriff’s office.

Mrs. Scott saw him and came toward Nick. “We’ve searched the neighborhood and there wasn’t any sign of Corey. We’re reorganizing to cover the areas away from here. The sheriff is arriving soon and some more deputies. They’re bringing in a couple of tracking dogs too. Five to six inches of snow are predicted tonight. We need to find him before he freezes.”

“What happened?” Nick stared at Ned.

“After you called me earlier to check on Ned and Corey, which I did, I left Corey’s house because Ned woke up and assured me he was fine. He practically kicked me out. I decided then to make some cookies to share with Corey and Ned as an excuse to check on them after an hour and a half. When I went over to the house, Ned finally opened the door. He looked like he had just woken up, so he’d probably continued to drink after I left. At least that’s how he smelled. He invited me in while he called Corey. The boy never came. I helped Ned search his house to make sure Corey wasn’t hiding. That man was getting madder by the second. I discovered just a few minutes ago Ned went to the store not long after I left the first time.”

Nick swung his attention to Mrs. Scott. “The liquor store?”

Mrs. Scott nodded.

“Are you the one who called the sheriff?”

“Yes. Ned didn’t want to. He was sure Corey would show up. By that time it was getting dark. I went home and called.”

Nick nodded toward Darcy. “Mrs. Scott, this is Darcy—a friend who heard about Corey and wanted to help.”

Darcy shook Mrs. Scott’s hand. “I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. Where do you think Corey would have gone?”

“He isn’t at any of his friends’ houses. The deputy checked those first, so I don’t know.” Mrs. Scott patted Nick’s arm. “If anyone can find him, it’s you. I don’t know any of his favorite haunts and neither does his father.” Anger infused the last sentence. “I declare I haven’t seen a man quite like that one.”

A conversation Nick had had with Corey last month came to the foreground of his thoughts. The child had been so mad at his father for forgetting to pick him up at his friend’s house. He’d ended up walking home. Since it was getting dark, he had used the woods as a shortcut and stumbled upon a thicket—a great hiding place, according to Corey. “There are a few places that Corey and I have talked about. A couple we’ve been to. But one he said was his secret fort. He told me the general location in the woods. I think we should look there first.” Nick didn’t want to stand around while the deputies organized the search.

Mrs. Scott’s mouth pinched into a frown. “But it’s so dark at this time of night. How are you going to look there?”

“I have some flashlights, one in my glove compartment and another in my toolbox. That’s all I need.” He turned to Darcy and added, “But you might want to stay here—”

“I’m game. It’s getting colder.” Darcy shivered. “I won’t be surprised if there’s snow in the next hour or two. We need to find Corey.”

“Mrs. Scott, please tell the deputy where we’re going and that we could use more people. It’s the wooded area behind the elementary school.” It would be better if Nick didn’t go near Ned at the moment. He threw one last look at the man, who was still frowning as if this whole affair was an inconvenience. Although Nick’s and Corey’s situations were different, Nick knew the emotional whirlwind the boy was going through and how alone the child must feel.

“Will do, but, dearie,” Mrs. Scott said, peering at Darcy’s high heels, “you can’t go in those shoes.”

Darcy grinned. “I’m going to change.”

As Nick and Darcy headed for his pickup, she said, “I think you and Mrs. Scott are right—Corey’s dad has been drinking a lot. His eyes are bloodshot, his hands are shaking and his skin is pasty. In my job I’ve encountered enough alcoholics to know when I see one.”

Nick opened the passenger door. “It’s been getting worse. That may be what made Corey leave.” When his own dad drank, all Nick had wanted to do as a child was hide. He shut the truck door, made his way to the driver’s side and switched on the engine, throwing a glance at Darcy. “What’s your job?”

For a long moment Darcy didn’t answer. Nick turned the truck around and headed the way they had come. Still no reply.

He was about to tell her to forget the question when she murmured, “I’m a lawyer—for Legal Aid.”

Surprise flitted through him. He wasn’t sure what he’d pictured her doing. When he thought about it, the fact that she was a lawyer wasn’t what astonished him—it was that she worked for Legal Aid. The clothes she wore and the car she drove didn’t fit his image of the belongings of someone working for the poor. And yet, she’d quickly volunteered to search for a child she didn’t know. He was discovering there was a lot under the cool, composed facade she presented to the world.

“You can close your mouth now. I’ve been working at the office in Mobile since I got out of law school a few years ago. My father comes from old money. Giving back to the community is very important to both my parents. When I was young, no more than five, he had me volunteering right

alongside him or my mother. By the time I went to college I knew I was going to fight for people who often can't fight for themselves."

"You need to give Fletcher Phillips a lesson in how to give back. Instead, he pushes his own agenda to make more money."

"Are you talking about Ned and Corey?"

"Yes, that's one example, but the boys ranch is another."

"What boys ranch?"

"We have a Lone Star Cowboy League Boys Ranch here in Haven, founded in 1947 by Luella Snowden Phillips. She used her own ranch as a place for troubled boys around the state to receive support and care and to learn a better way to deal with their problems."

"Any relative to Fletcher Phillips?"

"Yes, his grandmother. But he wants to close the place down."

"Why would he want to shut down something his grandmother started and supported?"

"Good question. Now you see why he isn't one of my favorite people. He says it devalues the property around the boys ranch and hurts Haven's economy. All he sees is a bunch of troublemakers, not young children and teens who have problems. His father, Tucker, was actively involved in the ranch. He isn't alive, but if he were he would be so disappointed in his son."

"I can see why you feel that way about Fletcher, but has anyone invited him to the ranch to see firsthand what's going on? Maybe even volunteer and get to know the children?"

Had they? Nick didn't know. "The townspeople are always welcomed at the boys ranch."

"Sometimes the obvious has to be pointed out to some people."

Nick chuckled. "That would be Fletcher, but I can't see even a grand tour of the boys ranch changing that man's mind. And I certainly can't see him volunteering there." He pulled into a parking space at the elementary school. "I met my share of people in the army who had to have it their way or no way. They were rigid and never wanted to compromise."

"There are people like that in every facet of life. I try to look at things from their perspective."

Nick climbed from the truck, paused and asked over the hood, "How's that working for you?"

"Actually pretty well, but I'll admit there are some who can make it hard for a person."

Nick studied her profile as she stared at the woods across the field. Was he one of those people? The thought didn't sit well with him. "So why do you think Ned drinks himself into a stupor and ignores his son?"

"I imagine the second part comes because of the first—Ned's drinking problem. Most people drink to excess because they aren't happy and don't know how to make it better. What happened to Corey's mother?"

Nick walked to the back of the truck and let the tailgate down. "I don't know. Corey was a toddler when she died. He said his dad wouldn't talk about her." And that topic never came up with his army buddy, Corey's older brother. Her question brought thoughts up about Nick's own mother, who died when he was seven. Was that what led to his father's drinking problem? Even so, that didn't give him the right to hit Nick whenever he felt like it. He was thankful that by the time he was fifteen his dad had backed off. Probably because Nick was stronger and bigger than his father.

He gestured to her multiple bags. "Which one do you need?"

Darcy pointed to two of them, and Nick slid them to her. "Maybe Corey running away will shake up his dad," she said as she changed her shoes and found her hat and gloves.

Nick shut the tailgate, handed her a flashlight and then started across the school playground toward the woods. "Probably not. This isn't the first time he's gone missing, but usually the sheriff isn't involved. No doubt he is this time because Mrs. Scott knew something was wrong and called them. Ned never would have. I don't know what would have happened if Mrs. Scott didn't help me out by keeping an eye on the boy. If she hadn't come back with cookies, Ned would have resumed drinking and still might have been oblivious to the fact that Corey could be freezing to death."

“Did you know Doug before y’all were in the army?”

He switched on his flashlight, the crunch of fallen leaves sounding in the quiet. “Yes, the family lived in Haven for a while when I was a freshman in high school. That’s when Doug and I became friends. Then his family left and went to Dry Gulch. When I enlisted, I met up with Doug again at boot camp. He was escaping his father like I was.” The last sentence came out before he could censor himself. Darcy was too easy to talk to.

“You were?”

He didn’t share his past with anyone. Even he and Uncle Howard didn’t talk much about what had happened as Nick grew up. It just brought up hard feelings toward his dad, and Nick had enough to deal with keeping the ranch afloat due to his father’s mismanagement. Nick had used all his savings to bail the Flying Eagle out of debt, but he didn’t have enough left to do much else. “I was a teenage boy who thought he knew what was best for him.”

“Where is Doug now?”

“He was killed on a mission.”

Darcy slowed her step. “I’m sorry to hear that. I see why you’re trying to help Corey.”

Frustration at his inability to help Corey as much as the kid needed plagued Nick. It brought back all the helplessness he’d felt as a child.

* * *

As they moved deeper into the stand of trees, Darcy followed a step or two behind, sweeping her flashlight over the left area while Nick searched the right side.

She’d never imagined she would be spending her first night in Haven looking for a lost child. But there was no way she would have stayed away. Corey and she were kin.

Family had always been important to her—something she didn’t take for granted. What if her mom and dad hadn’t adopted her? Then where would she be? Until she’d begun the search for her biological parents, she hadn’t really thought much about where she’d come from. When her birth mother rejected the offer to meet with her, it had devastated her more than she thought possible. And after hearing about Fletcher, she didn’t think meeting her birth father would be any different. The thought saddened her.

She shouldn’t unpack. Instead, she should just leave when her car was fixed. She should forget the father who had never cared for her—and, from what she was discovering about the man, would never care in the future. He’d turned his back on a ten-year-old cousin. She always tried to look for the good in others, but with each bit of information she found out about her father, it was becoming more difficult. Lord, how could Fletcher Phillips do that to a child—in fact, to a whole ranch full of boys in need?

She didn’t realize she had slowed her step until suddenly Nick was several yards in front of her. She hurried her pace and the toe of her boot caught on a root, throwing her off balance. She floundered and nearly fell.

But Nick grabbed her, halting her ungraceful descent. “You okay?” He steadied her, close enough that she got a good whiff of his citrus-scented aftershave.

Her heartbeat picked up speed. “I tripped. That’s all.” She needed to keep her thoughts centered on finding Corey, not why she came to Haven—or the man she was with. There was something about Nick—the way he talked about Corey—that attracted her.

Her breathing shortened. He was too close for her peace of mind. “Thanks.” She stepped back and inhaled deeply. “Are we near the place Corey was talking about?” she asked, wanting to focus on the child, not the racing of her heartbeat. “I noticed a few snowflakes falling.”

“I know. His fort should be up ahead. I just hope he’s there. If not, I’ll call Mrs. Scott and see if Corey has been found.”

“What if he hasn’t been?”

“Then I think we really need to comb these woods. He uses it as a shortcut from school as well as to his friend’s house. It’ll be harder in the dark. We’ll need a lot more people. I’m glad they’re using some tracking dogs. In the meantime, we can at least rule out his fort and this part of the forest.”

Darcy scanned the towering trees, some leafless, others evergreens or ones that retain their dead leaves until spring. A black veil dominated the area beyond the glow of their flashlights. She quaked. “I guess for a boy this would be a great place to play in during the daytime.” But not at night.

“But not for a girl?” Nick continued forward, glancing back to make sure she was behind him. Even from a distance she sensed the concern that gripped him.

“No, for some it would be. Not for me though. I wasn’t much of a tomboy, except when it came to fishing. I love to go fishing. My dad owned a boat, and we often went out in the Gulf of Mexico. So much fun. What did you do for fun growing up?” Maybe concentrating on something other than Corey’s predicament would reduce Nick’s stress. She’d learned in her work that tension only made a situation worse, sometimes leading to bad decisions.

“I played football and baseball. I was also part of the junior rodeo.”

“I took ballet and played the violin. I did learn to ride a horse English-style.” As a teen she gave up the other two interests to focus on her mare and going to horse shows.

“We come from different worlds.”

The more she was around him, the more she realized that, and yet there was something about Nick that intrigued her. He’d made a promise to a comrade to take care of his little brother, and he was determined to keep it. Like her, he fought for the underdog. She admired him for that. For that matter, he’d stopped to help her when her car died even though he was going the other way.

Finally Nick halted and pointed to a large thicket of bushes up ahead. “That’s the fort,” he said and then he called out loudly, “Corey, it’s Nick.”

Darcy held her breath. Please, Lord, let him be here and okay.

Nothing but the sound of the wind blowing through the woods.

Nick closed the distance between them and the dense undergrowth. “Corey, I want to help.”

“I’m glad it’s cold enough that things like snakes are hibernating,” Darcy said as they approached.

“So am I.”

“Are you scared of snakes?”

“Nope. But we have a lot of rattlers around here, and I don’t want Corey to encounter one. Oh, and by the way, snakes don’t hibernate. I’ve seen some in the winter.” He winked and then started to the side. “You stay here. I’m gonna circle this brush and see if there’s an easy way in.”

Oh, good. He’d said that bit about the snakes on purpose and then left. She scowled at his back. As Nick moved farther away, Darcy hugged her chest and tried to see through the green-and-brown barrier in front of her where she was shining her flashlight. What if a rattlesnake was keeping warm under the thicket—and Corey had been bitten by it? What if...

Darcy quickly shut down those thoughts. She liked frills and lace. She liked girly things, and a snake wasn’t one of those. She and Nick were definitely opposites and that was fine by her. And yet, she remembered his quick reflexes when he caught her before she could hit the ground. Okay, they might be opposites, but there was an appeal to the cowboy who dropped everything to look for a child.

Whoa. Where were these thoughts coming from? Exhaustion after driving all day? She wasn’t in Haven for anything but gathering information about her birth father. She was going to be here only a short time. The more she heard about Fletcher the less she wanted to talk to him, but it wouldn’t be right to pass up discovering what she could about her biological family since she wanted children of her own.

To her left Nick shouted, “Stop, Corey!”

The next thing Darcy saw was the boy rounding the end of the undergrowth, coming to a halt when he spied her and then darting to the side to avoid her. Nick closed in on him from behind. Darcy

shot forward, trying to block his escape. When she was within a few feet of him, she took a flying leap and tackled Corey to the ground.

"Get off me! Get off me!" the child yelled.

Still clutching her flashlight, Darcy threw her body across his stomach while Corey wiggled and twisted. Was this what riding a wild bronco felt like?

Through her strands of blond hair she saw two cowboy boots planted near Corey's shoulder, a pool of light coming no doubt from Nick's flashlight. She thought it was safe for her to sit up, but the second she did, the boy jumped to his feet and tried to race away.

With lightning speed Nick grasped the child's upper arms and held him still. "What's going on with you, Corey?"

"I don't want to go back. I'll run away again if you make me go."

The anger in the boy's voice made Darcy forget about the dead leaves clinging to her coat and the bruises she was sure to develop from stopping him. Beneath his fury was desperation. She'd heard it enough in her job at Legal Aid. Not long after desperation came hopelessness. She tried to stop that from being someone's reality. Who was going to give Corey hope? His father? Not unless something changed.

Corey tried to yank his arms away from Nick, tears running down his face now.

All Darcy wanted to do was hold the boy until he calmed down, but she couldn't, even though he was her cousin—family. Besides Fletcher, she was probably his closest relative in the area. But no one knew that but her.

"Let me go. Dad doesn't care." A sob caught in Corey's throat.

Nick still held Corey, but when he knelt in front of the boy, his expression softened. "But I care about you. It's gonna snow and get really cold tonight. Did you think about that?"

Corey looked to the side. His blue gaze—so much like Darcy's—landed on her. "Who are you?"

The words I'm your cousin almost slipped out. Instead she smiled and said, "I want to help you."

"You can't. No one can."

The hopelessness leaked into his words and broke her heart. Coming to Haven was so much harder than Darcy had ever thought it would be.

"That's not going to stop me from trying. I don't know about you, Corey, but Miss Hill and I are cold. Let's settle this somewhere warm."

Her cousin stuck out his lower lip. "Fine. Nothing's gonna change."

"There are a lot of people searching for you and worried about you. Mrs. Scott was beside herself. She called the sheriff." Nick kept his hand clamped on Corey's shoulder and started back toward the elementary school parking lot.

"Dad will be mad about that."

"What did you think was going to happen if you ran away?" Darcy boxed the boy in on the other side and prepared to go after him if he broke loose from Nick's hold.

"Somethin' better. Anywhere would be better than here," Corey mumbled and dropped his head as he shuffled his feet toward the edge of the woods.

When Darcy returned to Mobile, the first thing she would do was hug her parents. She knew raising kids was difficult, but seeing someone like Corey only made her want to have her own children more than before. She had so much love to give a child.

She'd been blessed to have a wonderful mother and father. But others, like Corey, hadn't been. Maybe while she stayed in Haven, she would check out the boys ranch. Her biological father might not want to have anything to do with the place, but she did.

The minute they returned to Nick's truck, he settled Corey inside. While the boy sat sandwiched between them, Nick called Mrs. Scott to let her know they had found Corey.

The child folded his arms over his chest and hunched his shoulders farther down as Nick drove closer to Corey's house. In that moment Darcy felt like a fish in the Gulf taking the bait and being

caught. It would be hard to drive home to Mobile without making sure something long term was done for Corey. The question was what. Nick, one of the few people who cared for the child and the person who had stopped to help her tonight, might be able to assist her with that.

Chapter Three

Darcy didn't even know Corey, and still she wanted to do everything she could to take care of him. Make sure he was warm and fed a proper meal. There was something about the child that drew her—more than family ties. There was a lot of anger in Corey, but beneath it she sensed a need to be loved, or maybe she was just putting herself in Corey's situation and projecting her emotions onto him.

As they drove away from Dry Gulch, where they'd left Corey with the neighbor, Darcy turned to Nick. "Where I live, I volunteer at a shelter and work with children to find solutions for their situations. I've seen families deal with a member who is an alcoholic and the toll it puts on them, especially the children. Some of the kids have to grow up so fast because they are left to fend for themselves. It breaks my heart."

Nick waited at a stoplight to turn onto the highway that would return them to Haven. He slid a look at her, his expression still full of worry. "Me too." Unspoken emotions dripped from those brief words.

"What do you think will happen to Ned?" Darcy asked the question she was sure was on both their minds. They had left Dry Gulch after the sheriff arrested Ned and hauled him to jail.

"He'll probably only get a slap on the wrist. I'm more concerned about Corey. At least he's with Mrs. Scott for the night."

"Are you upset that Ned wouldn't let you take Corey home?"

Nick gave her a tired smile. "Am I that transparent?"

"Well...yes."

"Ned doesn't want to be the father he should, but he feels threatened by my relationship with Corey. I'm glad Ned let Mrs. Scott take Corey without much of a fight. She'll take good care of the child, and I'll go to her house tomorrow morning."

"But you wanted to take him home."

"Yes, I feel responsible for him," Nick said, although she hadn't asked a question.

"Because of the promise to Doug?"

"Yep. When I give my word, I mean it. But it's more than..." Nick's voice trailed off in silence. "He'll be all right. I'm glad she called the sheriff earlier. All Corey had with him was a thin blanket. He could have frozen tonight."

There was something Nick wasn't saying. What? "Ned could be looking at child endangerment and neglect. The state could step in."

"I hope they do something this time."

"What do you mean, this time?"

"I have reported Ned's behavior before, but nothing was done. He left Corey alone overnight. Corey called me afraid because he heard a noise outside. I came over to be with him until his dad showed up in the morning. That's when my precarious relationship with Ned turned from bad to worse. Thankfully Mrs. Scott has been able to step in more, but she's had health issues. She's a temporary solution but not a permanent one."

"How about the boys ranch for Corey?"

"I know they have room for one more boy, and I'd much rather see Corey there, but Ned would never go for it."

"Unless this time the state does something about it."

"I volunteer at the boys ranch, and it's done a lot for the kids who live there. I'm there several times a week. It would be so much better for Corey than living with Ned. The boys ranch isn't like what Fletcher says. They aren't hooligans but kids who need extra help."

She wasn't surprised that Nick would volunteer at the boys ranch. In the short time she'd been with him, she'd seen a man of action and heart. "Then I'll pray to the Lord something is done for Corey."

"In my experience He hasn't helped much."

There was something in Nick's voice—pain—that touched her. Who did he turn to when he was in trouble or upset? She started to say something in reply to Nick's last statement, but the tense set of his jaw and rigid posture indicated this wasn't a good time. He wouldn't hear her.

She didn't want to leave Haven until something was done for Corey. How could she walk away from a child in need, a child she was related to?

She relished the silence as Nick drove toward Haven. Exhaustion weaved through her body, and she had to fight to keep her eyes open. But she perked up when he neared the place where her car had stalled. "Good. Slim must have towed my car."

"He'll be able to give you an estimate for fixing the car early tomorrow morning."

"I hope he can fix it right away." She only had a few weeks to discover what she'd come for, and after what Nick had told her about Fletcher trying to shut down the boys ranch, she wanted to see it too.

"At least the Blue Bonnet Inn is near downtown and within walking distance of most places, but Slim is gifted when repairing anything with a motor. The only thing that will hold him back is if he has to order a part. We don't have too many suppliers in this area, but Waco will."

Nick parked in front of a three-story Victorian house with a sign saying Blue Bonnet Inn. Lights illuminated the long, partial-wraparound porch and its white wicker furniture. Darcy's first thought was that it looked inviting, homey and peaceful. A perfect place to take her long-overdue, four-week vacation. She hadn't realized how much she needed to take a break until this moment. She sighed.

"Ready? Knowing Carol, she'll be up waiting for you." Nick assessed her.

And usually when someone did, it made Darcy uncomfortable, but she must be too tired to even feel that. "It's eleven. A lot has happened today."

"More than you bargained for, but I appreciate your help."

"Anytime. I hope you'll let me know what happens with Corey."

"Yes, ma'am, just as soon as I know." Nick tipped the brim of his cowboy hat and then climbed from his truck.

Darcy did the same and grabbed some of the luggage he'd put on the ground near the tailgate. When he hefted the two bigger suitcases as well as her duffel bag, he looked loaded down but strong enough to manage. Yesterday when she'd packed, she hadn't known what she would do once she came to Haven, so she'd planned for everything she could think of. Now she realized it appeared she was moving in rather than staying for a short vacation.

Darcy started for the entrance to the inn with her hands full too. "When I was trying to figure out what to bring, I read that the weather here can be spring-like one day and full winter the next."

"So you brought all your clothes?" He paused on the porch, the bright light allowing her a good look at Nick McGarrett.

He was mighty attractive. "No, I left more than half my wardrobe behind."

"You're kidding?"

"I'm afraid not. I like clothes but especially shoes. The duffel bag is full of them."

He shook his head and moved toward the front door. "I own a pair of tennis shoes and dress boots as well as work ones. That's all."

Over six foot three, he commanded a confident presence. His chestnut-brown hair peeked out from under his cowboy hat. She would have been able to tell his build was muscular even if she hadn't known one suitcase was full of books she'd wanted to read but had been too busy to this past year. The angular planes of his face complemented his firm mouth, but what drew her full attention were his piercing blue eyes, reminding her of the Gulf on a sunny day.

“Men don’t have all the choices women have,” she finally said when she realized she was staring at him and he’d noticed.

“Don’t see a need for so many choices. Makes getting dressed much easier.”

The heat of a blush flooded her face. She opened the door and stepped into the inn, the scent of lavender filling the air and welcoming her in from the cold. Ah, someone who understood the importance of essential oils. Already she was letting go of her stress.

Darcy scanned the large foyer, glimpsing into a dining room on one side and a large living room on the other. Antiques, such as a bookcase, desk and end tables, were sprinkled among the elegant but comfortable-looking couches and chairs. She took a step toward what must be the heart of the inn, enthralled by the beautifully carved mahogany coffee table between two cream-colored sofas.

A middle-aged woman with auburn hair pulled into a bun came from the back of the house. “You must be Darcy Hill. I’m so glad you’re here. I’m Carol Thornton, the owner of the Blue Bonnet Inn.” Her eyes crinkled at the corners when she smiled.

Darcy immediately felt at home. “Yes, I am. You have a beautiful place.”

“It’s been in my family for years.” Carol turned to Nick. “How’s Corey?”

“Safe and staying with Mrs. Scott, his neighbor. The sheriff arrested Ned.”

“It’s about time they did something about that man’s neglect and drinking. If I can help, let me know, Nick,” Carol said, then shifted her gaze back to Darcy. “I called Slim, and he has your car. He’ll look at it first thing in the morning.”

“That’ll be great. Nick told me I could walk to the garage.”

Carol waved her hand. “It’s only a few blocks away, but then a lot of places are here in Haven. If you need a ride, I can help or my husband, Clarence, can. Speaking of my husband, he fell asleep an hour ago. He’s been fighting a migraine all day. Will you please—”

“Say no more, Carol. Where do you want me to take these suitcases?” Nick, still loaded down with Darcy’s bags, walked to the staircase. “Then I need to leave. Tomorrow will be here soon enough.”

“The second room on the right. Thank you, Nick. I knew I could count on you.”

“And I can take care of these.” Darcy gestured to the few she’d set on the floor. Before Carol could say anything, Darcy picked up the bags and mounted the stairs behind Nick.

“Are you hungry?”

Darcy paused halfway up and looked down at Carol. “Starving.”

“When you’re settled, come down to the kitchen. I’ll fix you and Nick bowls of vegetable soup to tide you over until morning.”

“Thanks. It sounds delicious.” If she had the energy even to eat.

Darcy continued to trudge up the stairs, her body protesting with each step. When she reached the second floor, she noticed the door to the second room on the right was open. Nick came out of the entrance and retrieved two pieces of luggage from her.

“You look like you’re on your last leg.” He disappeared into her room.

How did he still have so much energy? She’d left hers back in Dry Gulch after getting Corey into Nick’s truck. Once they’d found the child, what she’d been functioning on drained from her quickly.

The second she moved into her suite all she wanted to do was go to sleep. Suddenly, not even food was enough to motivate her to go back downstairs.

“Will you please tell Carol that I’ve changed my mind? If I made it downstairs, I know I wouldn’t make it up here again. And I doubt she would want a guest sleeping on a couch in her living room.”

He stopped in front of her and removed the remaining bags from her grasp. His eyes locked with hers. “I know how you feel. I’ve been running on adrenaline the past few hours, and now I don’t have any left. I’ll tell her and let you know when I hear something about Corey.”

Fighting the urge to lose herself in his blue gaze, she was surprised she had the energy even to smile, but she managed somehow. She didn’t look away. “I appreciate that.”

For a long moment he remained in front of her. She couldn't move. Nick attracted her. She didn't know a lot about him personally, but she'd seen him in action tonight, trying to find a child. Too bad she wouldn't be here more than three or four weeks before she returned to Alabama and her life there.

For the past two years, she'd been dating a guy who worked with her at the Legal Aid office in Mobile. They had so much in common—helping others, the same career—and she'd known him for years, but right before the holidays, they had mutually decided to be only friends. There was no spark between them, and she was beginning to believe there never would be.

She needed to focus on what she came to do, not a cowboy who made her start questioning her love life—or lack of one. She was just passing through Haven, here to learn about Fletcher and now any other family members. Then she would leave.

Nick strolled past Darcy and out into the hall. He gave her one nod. His actions dragged her away from her perfectly happy life in Alabama. Their gazes connected one last time. Her pulse sped while her lungs held her breath.

"Again, thanks for your help this evening. Good night." His deep, husky voice wrapped around her, chasing away any lingering chill from earlier and confusing her even more.

The sound of his footsteps going down the stairs echoed through her mind until she finally shook herself out of her daze, plodded to the four-poster bed and collapsed on it. Her last thought as sleep descended was of Nick holding Corey as he tried to console the boy. He would make a great father.

* * *

After feeding the animals the next morning, Nick entered his house through the back door, stomping off the snow that had fallen lightly throughout the night. At least Darcy was comfortable at the inn and Corey was with Mrs. Scott. Nick would drive over to Dry Gulch after he ate breakfast. Then he could hopefully let Darcy know what would happen with Corey.

The events of the day before only reconfirmed he wouldn't be a good father. Yes, he had found Corey, but he should have been there in the first place and stopped the child before he ran away.

Nick hung his overcoat and Stetson on a peg, noticing a beige hat and a black jacket on the remaining two hooks. The ever-present scent of coffee peppered the air. He loved that smell. The sound of shuffling footsteps coming toward the kitchen alerted him to his uncle's presence.

"I didn't hear you come in last night or get up this morning. I tried to stay up, but obviously I fell asleep in my lounge chair. You should have awakened me. How's Corey?"

"We found him." Nick went on to tell his uncle about Ned's arrest and Mrs. Scott taking the boy.

"I figured he was okay or you wouldn't have come home. What's this about you picking up a stranger?" His uncle, a tall, thin man with graying hair, ambled to the refrigerator, removed a mixing bowl and poured its contents into a black skillet on the stove.

"How did you hear about Darcy?"

"Carol called me to let me know what was happening in case you forgot to. Of course, she knows you would have filled me in eventually. It was just an excuse to gossip, although she didn't tell me a lot about this woman you rescued on the highway."

"I don't know a lot. She's about my age. She's a lawyer." He wouldn't tell his uncle how pretty Darcy was or he would make more of it. Uncle Howard was determined Nick would marry one day. Nick was just as resolved to stay single. Even when his mother was alive, his parents' marriage had been volatile—not something he would want.

"Carol told me Darcy has the room booked for three weeks with a possibility of staying a fourth one." Uncle Howard's curiosity came to the forefront of their conversation as he scrambled the eggs and then popped some bread into the toaster. "Why would a young woman come here and stay? We don't have too many coming through here, besides that Avery gal. And Avery has her own agenda."

Nick chuckled. "Don't know why."

His uncle shook his head. "Did you find out anything else about her?"

"I figure Carol and Clarence will get the lowdown and tell you. You three are such gossipers. Darcy is probably being drilled right now by Carol."

Uncle Howard propped one hand on his waist. "I do not gossip. I'm genuinely interested in the people around me."

"And yet you haven't discovered who is sabotaging the boys ranch or, for that matter, who messed with our fence a while back."

"I'm working on it, but I ain't no detective." When two pieces of bread popped up lightly toasted, Howard buttered each slice and set it on a plate. "I don't see why anyone would steal children's saddles, especially from a home for troubled boys."

"I could think of one—Fletcher. And the way the man feels about me bothering him about Corey, he could have sabotaged our fence too."

"I've considered him, but he would just use his influence and money to shut down the ranch, not soil his hands taking the saddles or letting the calves loose. Don't quite know why he's so against the ranch when his dad did a lot for it. I'm glad Tucker isn't alive to know what his son is doing. Now, our ranch might be another story. Fletcher ain't too happy with you. When are you going to the boys ranch next?"

"Tomorrow for sure. Flint said there are two horses I need to look at." Nick volunteered as a farrier when they needed one.

"I'm so glad he's found someone. Lana is perfect for him and will be a great mother for Logan."

"Married life will agree with Flint." Left unsaid was that marriage wouldn't work for Nick, especially with someone who wanted children. Seeing what Corey was going through only reinforced that notion.

"It's good for a lot of men. Look at Heath and Josie."

"Stop right there. Flint is the foreman at the boys ranch, and Heath is a Texas Ranger—they do all right for themselves. I'm struggling to make this ranch viable, and I don't know how I could support a wife when this place needs so much. So quit trying to fix me up. I don't have the time."

"There's always Avery Culpepper," Uncle Howard said with a chuckle, while dishing up the scrambled eggs.

Several months ago, Cyrus Culpepper, one of the boys ranch's earliest residents, had died and bequeathed his family place to the Lone Star Cowboy League. The larger property allowed the boys ranch to take in more kids. The only hitch to the inheritance was that the town had to find the four other original residents of the ranch, besides Cyrus. Also Avery Culpepper, Cyrus's granddaughter, needed to be located. And she had been, but Lana didn't think the woman who claimed to be Avery was the real one.

"Do you think she is for real?" Nick asked. If she wasn't, the boys ranch wouldn't meet all the terms of Cyrus's will, and the ranch would be sold to a developer to build a strip mall. The boys would have to be moved again. If that wasn't motivation to find everyone listed in the old man's will, Nick didn't know what was.

"I sure hope she is."

"Avery has been cozy with Fletcher, and he wants the land to be sold."

"I don't see him behind what has been going on at the boys ranch." Uncle Howard placed a plate in front of Nick and then went back and brought the coffeepot to the kitchen table.

"I agree. Stealing a therapy horse and saddles and letting out calves doesn't make sense unless Fletcher has really stooped low and is resorting to these tactics to shut down the boys ranch. He's a lawyer. He'll seek a legal way if he can."

"Fletcher has blinders on to the good the place does for kids who need help. But then the man doesn't have any children." Uncle Howard poured some coffee into his mug and then handed the pot to Nick.

“Neither do I, but I see the benefits of the ranch. He’s just plain mean-spirited.”

“He never used to bother you so much until you came home and began looking out for Corey.”

“How can someone who has plenty of money turn his back on family? Ned Phillips has no business being a father. No wonder Doug was concerned about Corey.” And no wonder Nick never wanted to be a father himself. He didn’t have the skills needed to be responsible for someone else.

“You’ve done what you can. Sometimes we just have to leave it in the Lord’s hands.”

“And look how well that has worked out,” Nick mumbled and drank a mouthful of his coffee.

“I wish I could have done more for you with your father, but I lived so far away. I failed you. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t know. He was good at hiding his abusive behavior. Once I tried telling someone, and I learned the hard way to keep my mouth shut. As far as I know, Ned hasn’t physically abused Corey, but verbally he tears the boy down all the time. It breaks my heart.” Nick’s stomach roiled with thoughts of the boy’s situation and the reminders of what he had gone through when his father drank.

“That’s why I think you’d be a good father. You know what not to do.” Then before Nick could reply, Uncle Howard bowed his head and said grace. When he looked up at Nick, he said, “I’m not giving up on you.”

“I don’t need—”

The ringtone on Nick’s cell phone distracted him. Quickly Nick answered, noting it was Mrs. Scott. “Is something wrong with Corey?”

“The state is sending him to the boys ranch. They just came and took him. Corey threatened he would run away again.”

Chapter Four

The morning of her second day in Haven, Darcy stood at the inn’s front picture window in the living room, holding a warm cup of coffee and staring at the snow-covered street. The snowfall had only been a couple of inches, but for a Southern gal like herself, driving even in a small accumulation made her so nervous she was afraid she would cause an accident. She would stay at the inn or walk to where she wanted to go until the car part came in and Slim installed it, hopefully later this afternoon.

Still, sitting around waiting today made her antsy. Her time here was limited, and after Corey running away last night, she wanted to make sure he would be all right before she left Haven at the end of the month.

She took a sip of her coffee as footfalls sounded on the hardwood floor. When she glanced over her shoulder, Avery Culpepper entered the room. She had long, bouncy blond hair and wore a baby blue wool dress that matched her big eyes and spiked heels, as well as more makeup than Darcy put on in a week. Darcy had met her briefly earlier that morning.

Darcy smiled. “Good morning. Carol will have breakfast ready in five minutes. There’s coffee in the dining room.”

“I’ll get some later.” Avery joined Darcy at the window. “Thankfully there wasn’t too much snow. I’m meeting Fletcher this morning.”

“Fletcher Phillips?”

Avery brushed her hair away from her face. “He’s the only Fletcher in this town. He’s a lawyer who’s been giving me some advice for when I get my inheritance.”

“Inheritance?”

“From my grandfather, Cyrus Culpepper.”

“The one who bequeathed his land to the boys ranch?”

“Yes.” Avery glanced out the window. “I’ve got to go. See you around.”

Darcy watched as Avery headed toward Fletcher’s Lexus. He climbed out of the car and rounded the hood to open the passenger door for Avery. Darcy’s biological father wore a Stetson, a black suit and boots. She must have gotten her height from him because her birth mother was only five foot two.

He turned his head toward the bed-and-breakfast, and their gazes met and held for a few seconds. Because she was looking for it, she saw a resemblance between them in the eyes and chin. He had a cleft in it like she did. She pivoted away and moved from the window. Her heartbeat thudded against her rib cage.

What was Fletcher Phillips doing with a woman half his age?

She felt as though she'd stepped into the middle of a story and didn't know what had already happened.

"I hope you're hungry. Breakfast is ready," Carol said from the living room entrance.

Darcy blinked and pushed thoughts of Fletcher from her mind. Besides Avery and her, there was only another couple staying at the inn. The husband and wife weren't in the dining room. She was curious about the people of Haven, and from what she'd seen so far, Carol would be a great person to talk to.

"Will you sit and join me? I hate eating alone." Darcy sat at a table for four with a coffeepot and a bread basket already on it.

Carol smiled. "I'd love to. Be right back with our breakfast."

When she disappeared through the door into the kitchen, Darcy poured herself a cup of coffee and dumped several scoops of sugar into the brew. Carol returned with two plates, placed one in front of Darcy and then took the chair across from her.

Darcy peered at her omelet and the slices of melon on the side. "This looks delicious. I usually don't have much time to eat a big breakfast."

"I have some blueberry and bran muffins in the basket."

"This omelet and fruit is perfect. I stay away from breads."

"You have to watch your weight? You're thin."

"I have celiac disease and have to avoid all foods with gluten in them." When she was diagnosed six months ago, Darcy had begun her search for her biological parents. Celiac was a genetic disorder. Was there anything else she needed to be aware of in her family history?

"Are you all right now?"

Darcy didn't like talking about that time of uncertainty when she didn't know why she was tired all the time, losing weight and getting sick after eating certain foods. "Yes, so long as I follow my diet." She bowed her head and blessed the food.

When she looked up, Carol was studying her. "If you're still here on Sunday, you're welcome to attend the Haven Community Church with me and Clarence."

"I'd love to. What few people I've met so far have been friendly."

"Most are in Haven. There isn't much that goes on in our town that others don't know about."

"Nick mentioned someone called Fletcher Phillips. Do you know him?"

"I imagine Nick wasn't too happy with Fletcher when he talked about him. Nick volunteers at the Lone Star Cowboy League Boys Ranch, and Fletcher is trying to get it shut down."

"Why?" Darcy wanted Carol's take on the boys ranch.

"He thinks having a boys ranch here is bringing down the value of the property around town. All he sees is troublemaking kids. That's really not the case. The children need love and care, but he won't listen to reason."

"How do the people in Haven feel about it?" Darcy ate her first bite of omelet, the taste tempting her to take cooking lessons from Carol.

"Some go along with Fletcher, but there are many who don't."

"What would happen to the boys staying there if he got his way?"

"That would be the state's problem. The ranch is licensed by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services for their residential needs and for programs to help the boys."

First from Nick and now from Carol, Darcy wasn't getting a good feeling about her biological father. "Which side of the argument do you support?"

“One hundred percent for the boys ranch. My husband was there for a few years as a kid when his dad died and his mother couldn’t manage him. Fletcher thinks of the boys as juvenile delinquents. They are troubled but still children.”

As Darcy ate her omelet, she decided she would drive out there and look into the ranch. Without seeing it, she couldn’t form an opinion. Did Fletcher have a legitimate concern? “I’d like to see the place, maybe later today if I get my car back. How would the people running it feel if I went to see the ranch?”

“I’m sure Bea Brewster, the director, would welcome you.” Carol rose and stacked their plates. “I’ll make a map for you. And I’ll call her to let her know you’re coming by.”

As Carol hurried away, Darcy finished the last of her coffee, pleased she had something to do. When she’d planned to come here, she hadn’t thought of how she would spend her time other than catching up on her reading. She liked to keep busy, and looking into the boys ranch was a good way to have something to do—and possibly see Nick when he volunteered.

A minute after the phone rang, Carol reappeared in the living room. “Nick’s on the phone for you.”

“He is?” Darcy followed Carol to the phone in the hallway, surprised to be hearing from him, especially after she had just been thinking of him. When she answered, she asked, “Is Corey okay?”

“Not exactly. I’m at Mrs. Scott’s house. The state is taking Corey to the boys ranch, and he’s locked himself in the bathroom, screaming he won’t go there. Mrs. Scott is looking for the skeleton key.”

Her first urge was to drive to Mrs. Scott’s house and do...what? She was a relative stranger to Corey. “I wish I could help. My car won’t be repaired until late this afternoon or possibly tomorrow. Will he go to the ranch today?”

“Yes. I just wanted to let you know because of your concern last night.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it. If I get my car fixed later today, could I visit Corey at the ranch?”

“Seeing someone familiar would be great.”

“We don’t know each other well, but I’m glad to come as soon as I can.”

When Darcy hung up, Carol came over to her. “I couldn’t help overhearing that Nick’s friend is going to the boys ranch. If you don’t get your car back, I’ll drive you.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“It would be a good reason for me to pay a visit to my friend Bea. I could take you after I do a few things around here.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you know about my car.”

An hour and a half later, Carol drove Darcy to the boys ranch. Carol had called and discovered Corey was there at the barn with Nick. Darcy dressed in jeans, a white blouse and tennis shoes. As she strolled to the porch with Carol, she noticed Nick’s beat-up pickup parked next to the barn. Before she had a chance to ring the bell, the front door swung open and an older woman with brown hair and brown eyes appeared in the entrance.

The lady hugged Carol and then turned to Darcy. “It’s nice to meet you, Darcy.” She stood to the side. “Come in. I understand you’re staying at the inn for a few weeks. What has brought you here to Haven?”

“A forced vacation.”

Bea’s eyebrows rose. “Forced?”

“My parents, who fund a legal-aid office in Mobile, insisted I finally use my vacation days. It’s their way of telling me I work too much.”

“Why Haven?”

“Texas interests me, but I don’t want to go to a large city. I’m here for rest, not sightseeing. I thought I could help out while I was visiting. It’s hard to go from working ten-hour days to no hours.”

When she'd been diagnosed six months ago with celiac disease, her parents were convinced the stress of her job had made her symptoms worse.

"She's met Nick and even helped with locating Corey last night," Carol said as Bea closed the front door.

The manager of the boys ranch grinned. "My, you've jumped right in. So you're familiar with ranches or, in your area, farms?"

"Well, no. But I'm a quick learner. I help out in my church's nursery as well as in a shelter for families. I love animals and children."

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