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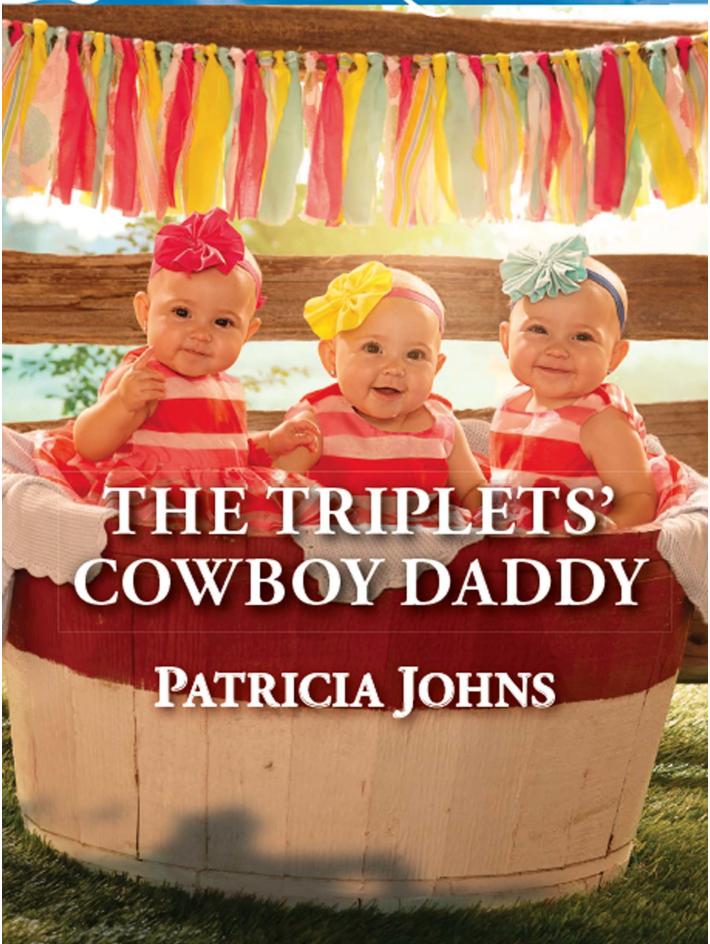

THE TRIPLETS' COWBOY DADDY

PATRICIA JOHNS

Patricia Johns
The Triplets' Cowboy Daddy

Аннотация

FROM CITY GIRL TO SINGLE MOMWhen Nora Carpenter becomes sole guardian of her triplet goddaughters, she needs backup—fast. So she heads home to the family ranch in Hope, Montana. But when she arrives, Nora learns that her great-grandparents' house now belongs to Easton Ross.Easton and Nora used to be friends, back when Easton was a lanky ranch hand who was always there for her. Now he's a rugged cowboy who hasn't forgiven her for leaving town. Easton lets Nora and the triplets bunk with him and can't help falling head over heels for the adorable babies. But Nora can't stay. For the triplets, living in Hope would mean a lifetime of gossip. And Nora has to put her new daughters first, even if it breaks her own heart.

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Easton glanced at her, then his gaze snapped back on the road.

The moment had been fleeting, but she'd caught something in that eye contact—something deep and warm.

"So you had a crush," she said, trying to sound normal. She still sounded breathy to her own ears. Bobbie started to whimper in the backseat, and Nora reached over to pop her pacifier back into her mouth.

"It was a weird thing to bond over," Easton admitted. "But I was the one guy who thought you were just as amazing as your dad did."

"I kind of knew you had a crush," she admitted.

"It was more."

Nora's heart sped up. She cast about for something to say but couldn't come up with anything. More than a crush... What was that? Love?

Dear Reader,

I'm a daddy's girl, and I married a man exactly like my father. They're both very techy, and they have similar quiet personalities that cover some very big opinions. My dad adored my mom, so when I met my husband and saw him loving me the same way I saw with my parents, I knew everything would be okay.

But what happens if your parents didn't have the kind of relationship that you want for yourself? That is where this book began—with a simple question: What would I do if I found out my dad had cheated on my mom? And what would that do to me? I confess, I don't think I'd deal with it gracefully.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you'd like to connect with me, you can find me on Facebook or on my blog, patriciajohnsromance.com. I'd love to see you!

Patricia Johns

The Triplets' Cowboy Daddy

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PATRICIA JOHNS has an honors BA in English literature. She lives in Alberta, Canada, with her husband and son, where she writes full-time. Her first Harlequin novel came out in 2013, and you can find her books in the Love Inspired, Harlequin Western Romance and Harlequin Heartwarming lines.

To my husband and our son.

You are the best choices I ever made.

I love you!

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Chapter One

Nora Carpenter could have cared for one baby easily enough. She could somehow have juggled two. But three—she'd never imagined that accepting the role of godmother to her half sister's babies would actually put her into the position of raising those babies on her own. She was still in shock.

Nora stood in her mother's brilliantly clean farmhouse kitchen, more overwhelmed than she had ever felt in her life. The three infants were still in their car seats, eyes scrunched shut and mouths open in hiccoughing wails. She stood over them, her jeans already stained from spilled formula and her tank top stretched from...she wasn't even sure what. She unbuckled the first infant—Rosie—and scooped her up. Rosie's cries subsided as she wriggled up against Nora's neck, but anxiety still made Nora's heart race as she fumbled with Riley's buckle. She'd come back to Hope, Montana, that afternoon so that her mother could help her out, but even that was more complicated than anyone guessed. These babies weren't just orphans in need of care; they

were three tiny reminders that Nora's father hadn't been the man they all believed him to be.

Everything had changed—everything but this kitchen. The counters were crumb-free, as they always were, and the room smelled comfortingly, and very faintly, of bleach. Hand-embroidered kitchen towels hung from the stove handle—two of them, one with Monday sewn across the bottom, and one with Thursday. Today was Friday. Unless Dina Carpenter was making jam or doing canning, this was the natural state—immaculate, with no care for properly labeled towels. The babies' cries echoed through the house.

Rosie, Riley and Roberta had finished their bottles just before Nora's mother had left for a quick trip to the store for some baby supplies.

"I'll be fine!" Nora had said. Famous last words. The minute the door shut, the cries had begun, and no amount of cooing or rocking of car seats made a bit of difference.

There was a knock on the back door, and Nora shouted, "Come in!" as she scooped up Riley in her other arm and cuddled both babies close. Riley's cries stopped almost immediately, too, and that left Roberta—Bobbie, as Nora had nicknamed her—still crying in her car seat, hands balled up into tiny fists.

Nora had no idea who was at the door, and she didn't care. Whoever walked through that door was about to be put to work. Served them right for dropping by.

"Need a hand?" The voice behind her was deep—and familiar.

Nora turned to see Easton Ross, the family's ranch manager, standing in the open door. He wore jeans and cowboy boots, his shirt pushed up his forearms to reveal ropy muscle. He'd changed a lot since their school days. Back then he'd been a skinny kid, perpetually shorter than she was. Not anymore. He was most definitely a grown man...and she was no longer the one with all the power. When her father died a few months ago, he'd left Easton a piece of property.

"Easton." She smiled tiredly. "Would you mind picking up Bobbie there? She needs a cuddle."

Her personal grudge against the man would have to wait.

"Yeah...okay..." He didn't sound certain, but he crossed the room and squatted in front of the car seat.

"You know how to pick up babies, don't you?" she asked.

"Uh...sort of." His face had hardened, his jawline now strong and masculine. He used to have acne as a teenager, but there was no sign of it now. Looking at him squatting there, she realized that she'd missed him more than she'd realized—and that wasn't just the fact that she didn't have enough hands right now. And yet, while she'd been away in the city, he'd been here with her dad, building a relationship that her father would reward him with her great-grandparents' homestead. Bile rose every time she thought about it.

"Support the head and the bottom," she instructed. "The rest will take care of itself."

Easton undid the buckle then cautiously scooped up the baby

in his broad, calloused hands. Bobbie settled instantly as Easton pulled her against his chest. He looked down at the baby and then up at Nora.

"There," he said. "That worked."

"Thanks..." Nora heaved a sigh. The quiet was more than welcome.

"Bobbie?" he asked. The babies were all in pink sleepers.

"Her full name is Roberta. But she's my little Bobbie. It suits her."

Nora had only had the babies in her charge for a few days of her twelve-week parental leave from work, but she was already attached. They were so sweet, and so different from each other. Rosie was the quietest of the three, and Riley couldn't abide a wet diaper. Bobbie seemed to have the strongest personality, though, and Nora could already imagine their sisterly dynamic as they grew.

"Yeah, I guess so," he said. "Hi."

"Hi." She gave him a tight smile. "Nice to see you again."

Last time she saw him was at the reading of the will. She pushed back the unpleasant memory. Regardless, Easton was a fixture around here. They used to be good friends when they were younger, and they'd spent hours riding together, or just sitting on a fence and talking. When times were tough, Easton always seemed to materialize, and his solid presence made a difference. Apparently, her father had had equally warm memories.

Easton met her gaze, dark eyes softened by a smile. "You look

good."

"Babies suit me, do they?" she joked.

"So the word around town—it's true, then?" he asked.

There it was—the beginning of the town's questions. There would be a lot of them, and the answers were complicated.

"What did you hear?" she asked warily. "How much do people know?"

"That you came back to town with triplets," he said. "That your dad had an affair, and you had a half sister..." He winced. "It that part true? I find it hard to believe of him. I knew your dad better than most—"

She chafed at that reminder. The homestead was an old farmhouse her great-grandparents had built with their own hands. Over the years, the Carpenters had maintained it and Nora's parents had used it as a guesthouse. It mattered, that old house. It was Nora's connection to her family's past and she'd loved that old place. For her father to have left it to someone else...that had stung. She only found out that he'd changed his will when he died. Her mother had been surprised because she said they'd talked about doing something for Easton, but hadn't landed on what exactly. Normally Cliff and Dina talked through everything. But it looked like even Easton had been in the dark about her father's biggest secret.

"Yes, it's true." Easton wouldn't be the only one to be disappointed in this town. "My half sister, Mia, introduced herself a couple of months ago. Her mom—the other woman—"

those words tasted bitter "—passed away a few years ago, and Mia was looking for her dad's side of the family. When I met her, she was already pregnant. There was no dad—she'd gone to a sperm bank. She really wanted kids and hadn't met the right guy yet."

Mia had had no idea about the affair and she never got a chance to meet Cliff. She had introduced herself after he died. It had been an awkward meeting, but Nora and Mia had recognized something in each other. Maybe they felt the genetic link. They'd both been raised only children, and to find a sibling was like a childhood daydream come true. Except this was real life, and they'd both had to come to terms with their father's infidelity.

"And you're godmother," Easton concluded.

"Yes. When she asked me to be godmother, I swear, I thought it was just a kind gesture. I never imagined this..."

Mia had died from childbirth complications—triplets being a high risk pregnancy to begin with—and Nora had grieved more deeply than she thought possible for a sister she'd only known a couple of months, whose existence rocked her own world. Nora was certain they'd have been close.

"Wow." Easton cleared his throat. "So your mom... I mean, these babies..."

"Yes, these babies are my father's illegitimate grandchildren." Nora sighed. "And Mom isn't taking it well."

That was an understatement. Nora hadn't told her mother, Dina, about Mia for a few weeks, afraid of causing her mother

more grief than she was already shouldering since her husband's death. So Dina Carpenter hadn't had long to adjust to this new information before Nora and the babies arrived on her doorstep.

And Dina hadn't adjusted. She was still coming to terms with her late husband's infidelity and learning to run the ranch on her own. The babies only seemed to fuel more heartbreak.

"So what are you going to do?" Easton asked.

Footsteps sounded on the wooden staircase outside; then the door opened and Dina came inside, dropping some shopping bags on the floor. She was plump, with graying blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. She shut the door behind her then looked up.

"You're back," Nora said.

"I got some baby clothes, diapers, formula, soothers, three bouncy chairs—they might help with..." Dina's voice trailed off. "Hi, Easton."

Nora recognized the trepidation in her mother's voice. The secret was out. She'd been holding this one close to her chest, and Nora knew how much her mother dreaded the whole town knowing the ugly truth about her husband's affair. So did Nora, for that matter. It was worse somehow that her father wasn't here to answer any questions, or take the brunt of this for them. He deserved to feel ashamed; they didn't. Nora and her mother hadn't been the ones to betray trust; he had. But he was dead, and they were left with the fallout of Cliff Carpenter's poor choices.

"Hi, Mrs. Carpenter." Easton stood awkwardly, the baby nestled against his chest, and seemed almost afraid to move. "Just

lending a hand. I came by to tell you that we're rotating pastures for fence maintenance, and that will require a bit of overtime from the ranch hands."

"More overtime?" Dina sighed. "No, no, do it. The southwest fences, right? We put them off last year, so..." She sighed. "Is that all?"

"Yeah." Easton nodded. "I can get going." He looked down at the baby in his arms then at Dina as if he didn't know what to do.

If the homestead was still in the family, Nora would have moved in there with the babies to give her mother some space, but that was no longer an option. Nora and Dina would just have to deal with this together.

"I guess we'll have to get the babies settled in your old bedroom," Dina said. She paused, put a hand over her eyes. "I still can't believe it's come to this."

"Mom, you know I can't take care of them alone—"

"And why did you agree to be godmother?" Her mother heaved a sigh. "I swear, your generation doesn't think!" She pressed her lips together. "I'm sorry, Nora. What's done is done."

Dina grabbed the bags and headed down the hallway toward Nora's old bedroom. Nora and Easton exchanged a look.

"She's not taking this well," Nora said, feeling like she had to explain somehow.

"I can see that." Easton glanced in the direction his boss had disappeared. "You going to be okay here?"

"Do I have a choice?" Nora failed to keep the chill from her

tone. The guesthouse would have been the perfect solution, but Easton owned it now. That wouldn't be lost on him. No matter how big the ranch house, the five of them would be cramped. Her mother was right—she hadn't thought this through. If she'd imagined that she'd ever have to step in and raise these girls, she would have found a polite way to decline the honor. Mia must have had some close friends...maybe some relative on her mother's side that she could have named as godparent.

Dina came back into the kitchen, her eyes redder than before. Had her mother been crying in the other room?

"Okay, let's figure this out," Dina said, her voice wooden. "Where are they going to sleep?"

* * *

NORA WAS STARING BLANKLY, and she looked like she wanted to cry. Two of the babies were snuggled in her arms. It was a stupid time for Easton to be noticing, but she was just as gorgeous as she'd always been, with her honey-blond hair and long, slim legs. He'd been halfway in love with her since the sixth grade. She'd never returned his feelings—ever.

Bobbie took a deep breath in her sleep then scrunched her face. He felt a surge of panic and patted the little rump as if soothing the baby would fix all of this. He glanced toward the car seat then at Bobbie. He wanted out of here—to get some space of his own to think this through. Except Nora and Dina looked like they were ready to collapse into tears, and here he stood, the legal owner of the obvious solution.

Easton was a private man. He liked quiet and solitude, and he had that with his new home—Cliff had known exactly how much it would mean to him. But Cliff hadn't known that he'd have three granddaughters landing on his doorstep after his death...

Dina obviously needed some time to process all this, and Nora needed help—he could feel her desperation emanating from her like waves...

Guilt crept up inside him—a nagging certainty that he stood between Nora and her solution. He didn't want to go back to the way things were when they were teens, and he certainly didn't want to give up that house and land that his boss had given him, but he couldn't just stand here and watch them scramble for some sort of arrangement as if it didn't affect him, either. He felt responsible.

The words were coming out of his mouth before he had a chance to think better of them. "You can stay with me, Nora. It's not a problem."

Nora and Dina turned toward him, relief mingled with guilt written all over both faces. There had always been tension between mother and daughter, and the current situation hadn't improved things.

"You sure?" Nora asked.

"You bet. It'll be fine. There's lots of room. Just for a few days, until you and your mom figure this out." He was making this sound like a weekend away, not a complete invasion of his privacy, but he was already entangled in this family and had been

for years. This was for old time's sake—for the friendship that used to mean so much to him. And maybe this was also a guilt offering for having inherited that house to begin with.

The next few minutes were spent gathering up baby supplies and getting the car seats back into Nora's four-door pickup truck. As Nora got into the driver's seat, Dina visibly deflated from where she stood at the side door. She'd been holding herself together for her daughter's sake, it seemed, and she suddenly looked small and older.

Cliff may have been many things, but he had been a good man at heart, and no one would convince Easton otherwise. A good husband? Perhaps not, given the recent revelation. But a man could be good at heart and lousy with relationships. At least Easton hoped so, because he seemed to fall into that category himself. If it weren't for Cliff, Easton's life would have turned out a whole lot differently. Loyalty might be in short supply, but Easton knew where his lay.

He got into his own rusted-out Ford and followed Nora down the familiar drive toward his little house. His house. Should he feel so territorial about the old place? He'd fixed it up a fair amount since taking ownership, and the work had brought him a lot of comfort. He'd grown up in a drafty old house in town filled with his dad's beer bottles and piles of dishes that never got washed. So when he found out that Cliff had left him the house and the land, something inside him had grown—like roots sinking down, giving more security than he'd ever had. He'd

stared at that deed, awash in gratefulness. He'd never been a guy who let his feelings show, but he had no shame in the tears that misted his eyes when he shook the lawyer's hand.

I shouldn't have gotten attached. And that was the story of his life, learning not to get attached, because nothing really lasted.

The farmhouse was a small, two-story house with white wooden siding and a broad, covered front porch. He hadn't been expecting company when he'd headed out for his morning chores, and he hoped that he'd left it decently clean. But this was his home, and while the situation was emotionally complicated, the legalities wouldn't change. Mr. Carpenter had left it to him. The deed was in a safety deposit box at the bank.

After they'd parked, Easton hopped out of his truck and angled around to her vehicle, where she was already unbuckling car seats.

"Thanks," Nora said as she passed him the first baby in her seat. "I don't know how to balance three of them yet. I should probably call up Mackenzie Granger and see if she has any ideas. She's got the twins, after all."

He held the front door open for her with the heel of his boot and waited while she stepped inside. The sun was lowering in the sky, illuminating the simple interior. Nora paused as she looked around.

"It's different than I left it."

"Yeah..." He wasn't sure how apologetic he should be here. "I got rid of the old furniture. It was pretty musty."

Easton hadn't put anything on the walls yet. He had a few pictures of his mother, but they didn't belong on the wall. She'd run off when he was eight—left a letter stuck to the fridge saying she couldn't handle it anymore, and that Easton was now his father's problem. He'd never seen her again. Considering the only family pictures he had were a few snapshots of his mom, the walls had stayed bare.

"Why did my dad leave this house to you?" Nora turned to face him. "I can't figure that part out. Why would he do that?"

Easton hadn't been the one to hurt her, but he was the one standing in front of her, regardless, and he felt an irrational wave of guilt. He was caught up in her pain, whether he meant to be or not.

"I don't know..." It had been a kind gesture—more than kind—and he'd wondered ever since if there were hidden strings. "A while ago, he said that he needed someone to take care of it, put some new life into it. I'd assumed that he wanted to rent it out or something. I didn't expect this."

"But this is my great-grandparents' home," she said. "I loved this place..."

She had... He remembered helping the family paint the old house one year when he was a teenager, and Nora had put fresh curtains in the windows in the kitchen—she'd sewn them in home economics class. She did love this old house, but then she'd gone to college and gotten a city job, and he'd just figured she'd moved on.

“You had your own life in the city. Maybe your dad thought —”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t have roots here in Hope!” she shot back. “This house is mine. It should have been mine... My father should never have done this.” She had to point her anger at someone, and it was hard to tell off the dead.

“What he should have done is debatable,” Easton said. “But he made a choice.”

She didn’t answer him, and he didn’t expect her to. She hated this, but he couldn’t change facts, and he wasn’t about to be pushed around, either. They’d just have to try to sort out a truce over the next few days.

“I’m making some tea,” he added. “You want some?”

They’d been friends back in the day, but a lot had changed. Easton grew up and filled out. Nora had gone to college and moved to the city. He was now legal owner of a house she was still attached to, and an old friendship wasn’t going to be cushion enough for all of this.

“Yes, tea would be nice.” Her tone was tight.

“Nora.” He turned on the rattling faucet to fill up the kettle. “I don’t know what you think I did, but I never asked for this house. And I never angled for it.”

“You didn’t turn it down, either.”

No, he hadn’t. He could have refused the inheritance, but it had been an answer to midnight prayers, a way to step out from under his past. Mr. Carpenter’s gift had made him feel more like

family and less like the messed-up kid who needed a job. Mr. Carpenter had seen him differently, but he suspected Nora still saw him the same way she always had—a skinny kid who would do pretty much anything she asked to make her happy.

And as dumb as it was, he also saw her the same way he always had—the beautiful girl whom he wished could see past his flaws and down to his core. He was a man now—not a boy, and most certainly not a charity case. Nora was a reminder of a time he didn't want to revisit—when he'd been in love with a girl who took what he had to offer and never once saw him as more than a buddy. It hadn't been only her...he'd been an isolated kid looking for acceptance anywhere he could get it, and he didn't like those memories. They were marinated in loneliness.

That wasn't who he was anymore. Everything had changed around here. Including him.

Chapter Two

Easton heard the soft beep of an alarm go off through a fog of sleep, and he blinked his eyes open, glancing at the clock beside him. It was 3 a.m., and it wasn't his alarm. The sound filtered through the wall from the bedroom next door. He had another hour before he had to be up for chores, and he was about to roll over when he heard the sound of footsteps going down the staircase.

Nora was up—though the babies were silent. It was strange to have her back...to have her here. She'd stayed away, made a life in the city where she had an office job of some sort. She would

come back for a weekend home every now and then, but she'd spent her time with friends, cousins, aunts and uncles. Easton didn't fit into any category—not anymore. He was an employee. He'd worked his shifts, managed the ranch hands and if he got so much as a passing wave from her, he'd be lucky.

Now she was in his home. Her presence seemed to be a constant reminder of his status around here—employee. Even this house—legally his—felt less like his own. There was something about Nora Carpenter that put him right back into his place. For a while he'd been able to forget about his status around here, believe he could be more, but with her back—

He wasn't going to be able to sleep listening to the soft sounds of a woman moving around the house anyway. He swung his legs over the side of his bed, yawning. The footsteps came back up the narrow staircase again, and he rose to his feet, stretching as he did. He was in a white T-shirt and pajama bottoms, decent enough to see her. He crossed his bedroom and opened the door.

Nora stood in the hallway, three bottles of milk in her hands, and she froze at the sight of him. Her blond hair tumbled over her shoulders, and she stood there in a pair of pajamas—a tank top and pink, pin-striped cotton shorts.

She's cute.

She always had been, and no matter how distant or uninterested she got, he'd never stopped noticing.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I was trying to be quiet."

He hadn't actually been prepared to see her like this—her

milky skin glowing in the dim light from her open bedroom door, her luminous eyes fixed on him apologetically. She was stunning, just as she'd always been, but she was more womanly now—rounder, softer, more sure of herself. They should both be sleeping right now, oblivious to each other. That was safer by far.

"The babies aren't crying," he pointed out.

"I'm following the advice of the social worker who gave me the lowdown on caring for triplets. She said to feed them on a schedule. If I wait for them to wake up, we'll have three crying babies."

It made sense, actually. He'd never given infant care—let alone infant care for triplets—much thought before. He should leave her to it, go back to bed...maybe go downstairs and start breakfast if he really couldn't sleep.

"Need a hand?" he asked.

Where had that come from? Childcare wasn't his domain, and frankly, neither was Nora. He'd been through this before with her—he knew how it went. She batted her eyes in his general direction, he got attached, she waltzed off once her problems were solved, and he was left behind, wrung out. Letting her stay here was help enough. As was picking up the crib for the babies after he brought her to the house. He couldn't be accused of callous indifference, but he also couldn't go down that path again.

She smiled at his offer of help. "I wouldn't turn it down."

Well, that took care of that. He trailed after her into the bedroom. The crib sat on one side of the room, Nora's rumpled

bed on the other side. A window, cracked open, was between the two, and a cool night breeze curled through the room. The babies lay side by side along the mattress of the crib. Rosie and Riley looked pretty similar to his untrained eye, but he could pick out Bobbie. She was considerably bigger than the other two. But "big" was relative; they were all pretty tiny.

"I was hoping my mom would be able to help me with this stuff," Nora said as she picked up the first baby and passed her to him along with a bottle. "That's Rosie," she added.

She proceeded to pick up the other two and brought them to her unmade bed, where she propped them both up against her pillow. She wiggled the bottle nipples between their lips.

"Time to eat," she murmured.

The babies started to suck without any further prompting, and Easton looked down at the infant in his arms. He followed Nora's lead, teasing the bottle into Rosie's tiny mouth, and she immediately began to drink. It felt oddly satisfying.

"So this is how it's done," he said with a soft laugh.

"Apparently," Nora replied.

They were both silent for a few moments, the only sound babies slurping. He leaned an elbow against the crib, watching the tiny bubbles move up the bottle and turn into froth at the top of the milk. He'd done this with calves on a regular basis, but never with a baby.

"I don't blame your mom," Easton said.

"Me, neither," she replied quietly. "I just didn't know where

else to go. When you feel lost, you find your mom."

Easton had never had that pleasure. His mom had abandoned them, and his dad...well, his dad could barely keep his own life together, let alone help Easton.

"Sorry..." She winced. "I forgot."

Yeah, yeah, his pathetic excuse for a family. Poor Easton. He was tired of that—the pity, the charitable thoughts. Be thankful for what you have, because someone else thinks you're lucky. It was a deep thought for the privileged as they considered how bad they could truly have it, before they breathed a sigh of relief that they still retained their good fortune.

"So why didn't you come back more often?" Easton asked, changing the subject.

"I was busy." She shot him a sidelong look. "Why?"

"It just seems to me that two weekends a year isn't much time with your family."

"We talked on the phone. What's it to you?"

He'd struck a nerve there, but she had a point. Who was he to lecture her about family bonds? He didn't have any of his own that counted for much. Besides, his complaint wasn't really about how much time she spent with her family. He'd missed her, too. His life kept going in Hope, Montana, and hers had moved on in the wider world. He resented her for that—for forgetting him.

"Mom and I—" Nora sighed. "We locked horns a lot."

"Yeah..." He hadn't expected her to open up. "I noticed it, but I never knew what it was about."

“Everything.” She shook her head. “Politics, religion, current events...you name it, we land on opposite sides of it. When I left for college, it gave me a whole new freedom to be me, without arguing with Mom about it. So I stayed away a lot.”

“Is that why you didn’t tell her about your half sister?” he asked.

He was watching her as she sat on her bed facing the babies, one leg tucked under herself. Bobbie finished her bottle first, and Nora put it down, still feeding Riley with the other hand. She was oddly coordinated as she bottle-fed two infants. Maybe it came from bottle-feeding orphaned farm animals. If you could wrangle a lamb or a calf into taking a bottle, maybe it was a skill like riding a bike.

“I needed to sort it all out in my own head before I told her about it,” Nora said, oblivious to his scrutiny. “It was like anything else. I thought I could have a sister—some semblance of a relationship with her—but I was pretty sure Mom would see that as a betrayal.”

“I get it.”

In fact, he understood both sides of it. It had to be hard for Dina to see her one and only daughter bonding with her late husband’s love child. Yet he could understand Nora’s desire to know her sister. The whole situation was a painful one—the sort of thing that made him mildly grateful for his lack of family coziness. At least he couldn’t be let down any more than he already had been. Rock bottom was safe—there was no farther

to fall.

Rosie was almost finished with her bottle, but she'd stopped drinking. He pulled it out of her mouth, leaving a little trail of milk dribbling down her chin.

"Is she done?" Nora asked.

"She stopped drinking." He held up the bottle.

"Okay. Just burp her, then."

Burp the baby. Of course. He knew the concept here—he wasn't a Neanderthal. He lifted Rosie to his shoulder, and she squirmed in her sleep, letting out a soft cry. Great, now he'd done it.

"Just pat her back," Nora said.

Easton gently tapped Rosie's back and she burped almost immediately, leaving a warm, wet sensation on his shoulder, dripping down toward his chest. He cranked his head to the side and could just make out the mess.

Nora chuckled. "Sorry."

Riley had finished her bottle, and Nora reached for Bobbie. It was an odd sort of assembly line as she burped them and he laid them back in the crib. He pulled the white T-shirt off over his head, getting the wet material away from his skin. He wadded up the shirt and gave his shoulder an extra scrub. It was then that he realized he was standing in front of Nora shirtless. Her gaze flickered over his muscular chest, and color rose in her cheeks.

"I'll just—" He pointed toward the door. He needed to get out of there. He'd fed and burped a baby—mission accomplished.

He wasn't supposed to be hanging out with her, and he definitely wasn't supposed to be this casual with her, either.

"Okay. Sure—"

Nora's gaze moved over his torso once more, then she looked away quickly. She was uncomfortable, too. Soiled T-shirt in hand, he headed out of the room. That hadn't been the plan at all, and he felt stupid for not thinking ahead. Who knew what she thought now—that he was hitting on her, maybe? That couldn't be further from the truth.

Blast it, he was up now. He might as well go down and make some breakfast. An early start was better than a late one.

* * *

NORA HADN'T EVER seen Easton Ross looking quite so grown-up. And she hadn't imagined that under that shirt were defined muscles and a deep tan. He had a six-pack—that had been hard to miss—and it left her a little embarrassed, too. A good-looking man might be easy enough to appreciate in a picture or on TV, but when he stood in your bedroom in the moonlight... She laid Bobbie next to Riley and Rosie in the crib and looked down at them for a moment, watching the soft rise and fall of their tiny chests.

It wasn't because she'd never seen a man without a shirt before. She'd always had a pretty healthy romantic life. But this was Easton—an old buddy, a quiet guy in the background. If he'd looked a little less impressive, she wouldn't have felt so flustered, but my goodness... When exactly had skinny, shy Easton turned

into that?

She was awake now—she'd have to get used to going back to bed after the 3 a.m. feeding, but she could hear the soft clink of dishes downstairs, and she had a feeling that she and Easton needed to clear the air.

Grabbing a robe, Nora pulled it around herself and padded softly down the narrow, steep staircase. She paused at the bottom on a landing that separated the kitchen from the living room. Looking into the kitchen, she could see Easton at the stove, his back to her. He was in jeans and a fresh T-shirt now, his feet bare. The smell of percolating coffee filtered through the kitchen.

"Easton?" She stepped into the kitchen, tugging her robe a little tighter.

He turned, surprised. "Aren't you going to try to sleep some more?"

"I'm not used to the up and down thing yet. When I get tired enough, I'm sure I will."

He nodded and turned back to the pan. "You want breakfast?"

"Kind of early," she said with a small smile.

"Suit yourself." He dropped several strips of bacon into the pan.

"Look," she said, pulling out a kitchen chair with a scrape and sitting down. "I think I'm in the way here."

"Since when?"

"Since I woke you up at 3 a.m."

"I'll be fine." His tone was gruff and not exactly comforting.

Was he doing this because she was the boss's daughter? It had to factor in somewhere.

"This is your home, Easton."

"You noticed." He cast her a wry smile then turned around fully, folding his arms across his chest. Yes, she had noticed. She didn't have to like it, but she was capable of facing facts.

"I should take the babies back to the house with my mom," she said. "I'm sorry. I hate that my dad left this place to you, but he did. So..."

She was sad about that—angry, even—but it wasn't Easton's fault. He could have turned it down, but who would turn down a house? She wouldn't have, either.

"You don't need to leave," he said.

"Oh." She'd thought he'd jump at any excuse to get her out of his home. If this night had proven anything, it was that this space was very much Easton's, and that felt awkward. This kitchen, where she remembered making cookies with her great-grandmother, was his kitchen now. She'd imagined she'd find peace here, but she'd been wrong. She shouldn't be surprised. A lot of her "perfect" memories hadn't been what she thought.

"You don't seem comfortable with me here, though," she countered. "And if I'm bound to make someone feel uncomfortable, it should be my own mother, don't you think?"

"I don't have a problem with you staying here," he replied, turning back to the pan. He flipped the bacon strips with a fork, his voice carrying over the sizzle. "Do you realize that I've

worked on this land since I was fourteen?"

"Yeah. It's been a while."

"That's sixteen years. And over those years, you and I became friends."

"I know."

"Real friends." He turned back, his dark gaze drilling into hers. "Do you remember when you broke up with Kevin Price? We talked for hours about that. I was there for you. I was there for you for Nathan Anderson, Brian Neville... I was there to listen, to offer advice. I mean, my advice was always the same—pick a better guy—but I was there."

Easton had been there for her, and she felt a blush rise at the memories. One rainy, soggy autumn day, they'd sat in the hayloft together, talking about a guy who wasn't treating her right. They'd sat for hours, just talking and talking, and she'd opened up more in that evening than she had with any guy she'd dated. But then her father had found them, ordered Easton back to work and told Nora to get inside. She could still remember the stormy look on her father's face. He hadn't liked it—probably assumed more was happening in the hayloft than a conversation.

Nora had talked too much back then. It had just felt so nice to have someone who listened like he did, but she might have led him on a little bit. She was a teenage girl, and her emotional world was vast and deep—in her own opinion, at least. She was mildly embarrassed about that now, but she wasn't any different than other girls. Easton was just a part-time ranch hand, and a guy.

He hadn't been quite so in touch with his own "vast and deep" emotional life, and maybe he'd been a little in awe of her...maybe he'd nursed a mild crush. But she hadn't ever considered him as more than a buddy.

"I was an idiot," she said with a short laugh.

"And then you picked up and left for college, and that was it."

Well, that sure skipped a lot—like all the college applications, the arguments with her mother about living on campus or off and all the rest of the drama that came with starting a new phase of life. And since when was college a problem?

She frowned. "I went to college. You knew I was going."

"Thing is," he said, "you walked away, and life went on. For sixteen years I worked this land, drove the cattle, worked my way up. I'm ranch manager now because I know every job on this ranch and could do it myself if I had to. No one can get one over on me."

"You're good at what you do," she confirmed. "Dad always said so."

"And when you did come back to visit, you'd wave at me across the yard. That was it."

Admittedly, their relationship changed over the years. But having him here—that was the awkward part. If they'd just been school friends, then a change in the closeness they shared would have been natural—like the ebb and flow of any relationship. But he'd worked with her father, so unlike her school friends—where some of those old friendships could die a quiet death—

she still saw Easton on a regular basis. From a distance, at least. He couldn't just slide into the past. When she did come home, she only had a few days, and she had to see a lot of people in that time.

"I was busy," she replied. "Friends and family—"

She heard it as it came out of her mouth. Friends—and she hadn't meant him. She'd meant people like Kaitlyn Mason, who she'd been close with since kindergarten. She winced. There was no recovering from that one, but it didn't make it any less true. Easton hadn't been high enough on her list of priorities when she'd come back.

"Yeah," he said with a sad smile. "Anyway, I was the worker, you were the daughter. Well, your dad saw fit to give me a little patch of land. I worked for this. I know that your great-grandparents built this house, and I know it means a whole lot to you, but I'm not about to sell it or tear it down. I actually think I might take your dad's advice."

"Which was?" she asked.

"To get married, have a few kids."

That had been her father's advice to him? Her father's advice to her had always been "Wait a while. No rush. Get your education and see the world." The double standard there irritated her, but she couldn't put her finger on why. Whoever Easton decided to marry and whatever kids they'd have, they'd be no kin of the people who built this house with their own hands. Her family—the Carpenters—had been born here, had died here...

Easton might have worked for her father, but he didn't deserve this house.

"Anyone special in mind?" she asked, trying to force a smile.

"Nope."

There was no use arguing. The house was his. She couldn't change it or fight it. Maybe one day she could convince him to sell to her, but that was about as much as she could do.

"If you ever want to sell this house," she said, "come to me first."

He nodded. "Deal."

Easton turned back to the stove and lifted the bacon from the pan with his tongs, letting it drip for a moment in sizzling drops before he transferred it to a plate. She had to admit—it smelled amazing. He grabbed a couple of eggs and cracked them into the pan. Was that it? Was that all she could ask from him—to sell to her if he ever felt like it? Probably, and he didn't look like he was about to back down, either.

He'd had a point, though. He'd spent more time with her dad than she had...he'd know things.

"Did you know about the other woman?" Nora asked.

He grabbed a couple thick slices of bread, dumped the bacon onto one of them, added the eggs sunny side up, and slapped the second piece on top. He turned toward her slowly and met her eyes.

"I get that you're mad at him," he said. "And you've got every right to be. But he wasn't my father, and what he did inside of

marriage or outside of it wasn't my business."

Nora stared at him, shocked. Was that the kind of man Easton was? He was just talking about a marriage and family of his own. She'd thought he'd have a few more scruples than that.

"But did you know?" she demanded.

"I'm saying he was my boss," Easton retorted, fire flashing in his eyes. "His personal life wasn't my business. I had no idea about the other woman—how could I know? We were working cattle, not cozying up to women. I'm not going to bad-mouth him, even if that would make you feel better for a little while. He was good to me. He was honest and fair with me. He taught me everything I know and set me up with this house. If you're looking for someone to complain about him and pick him apart with, you'd better keep looking. I'm not that guy."

He dropped his plate on the table and squashed the sandwich down with the palm of his hand. Then he grabbed a few pieces of paper towel and wrapped it up.

"You're nothing if not loyal, Easton," she said bitterly. Loyal to the man who'd given him land. He should have been loyal to a few basic principles.

Easton tossed the wrapped sandwich into a plastic bread bag then headed to the mudroom.

"I'm sorry for what he did to you," he said, not raising his head as he plunged his feet into his boots. "I get that it was a betrayal. But I'm staff, and you're family. I know the line."

The line? What line? Was he mad that they'd grown apart

over the years, that she'd moved away to Billings for a degree in accounting? What line was so precious that he couldn't stand up for the women who had been wronged?

"What does that mean?" she demanded. "Do you want me to go? Have I crossed a line with you?"

He grabbed his hat and dropped it on his head.

"No," he said quietly. "Stay."

He didn't look like he was going to expand upon that, and he pulled open the door, letting in a cool morning draft.

"You forgot your coffee," she said.

"I leave it on the stove to let it cool down a bit," he said. "I'll have it in an hour when I get back."

With that, he stepped outside into the predawn grayness. Then the door banged shut after him, leaving her alone with a freshly percolated pot of coffee and three sleeping babies.

Easton had made himself clear—his loyalty belonged to her dad. Well, her father had lost hers. Ironic, wasn't it, that the one person to stand by Cliff Carpenter's memory was the hired hand?

Chapter Three

Around midmorning, Nora heard a truck rumble to a stop outside the house. She looked out the window to see her mother hop out of the cab. She was wearing a pair of fitted jeans and boots, and when she saw Nora in the window, she waved. Nora hadn't realized how much she'd missed her mom until she saw her, then she felt a wave of relief. It reminded her of waiting to be picked up at Hope Elementary School. All the other kids

got on the bus, and Nora had to sit on the curb, alone. Her heart would speed up with a strange joy when she finally saw her mom in the family truck. She felt that joy on that school curb for the same reason: sometimes a girl—no matter the age—just needed her mom's support.

The babies were all sleeping in their bouncy chairs, diapers changed and tummies full. Nora's ridiculously early morning was already feeling like a mistake. She was exhausted. Back in the city, she'd been working in the accounting office for a company that produced equestrian gear. She'd worked hard, put in overtime, but she'd never felt weariness quite like this. A work friend had told her that her twelve weeks of parental leave would be more work than the office, but she hadn't believed it until now.

Nora pulled open the side door and ambled out into the warm August sunshine.

"Morning," she called.

"Mackenzie Granger dropped this by," her mother said, pulling a collapsed stroller out of the bed of the truck. "She said she got the triplet stroller for the boys and the new baby, but hasn't used it as much as she thought she would."

Nora couldn't help the smile that came to her face. She'd been wondering how she'd ever leave the house again with three infants, but thank God for neighbors with twin toddlers and new babies.

"I'll have to call her and thank her," Nora said. "And thank you for bringing it by."

Her mother carried the stroller over and together they unfolded it and snapped it into its open position. It was an umbrella stroller with three seats lined up side by side. It was perfect. Not too big, not too heavy, and she could transport all three babies at once.

"I had an idea." Dina shot Nora a smile. "Let's load the babies into this and you can come pick the last of the strawberries with me."

They used to pick strawberries together every summer when Nora was young. They'd eat as they picked, and even with all the eating, they'd fill bucket after bucket. Dina would make jam with some of them, freeze a bunch more and then there would be fresh strawberries for everything from waffles to ice cream. Nora used to love strawberry-picking. Then she became a teenager, and she and her mother stopped getting along quite so well.

Nora met her mother's gaze, and she saw hope in Dina's eyes—the flimsy, vulnerable kind of hope that wavered, ready to evaporate. Maybe her mother was thinking of those sweet days, too, when they used to laugh together and Dina would let Nora whip up some cream for the berries.

"Yeah, okay," Nora said.

They transferred the babies to the stroller quickly enough, and the stroller rattled and jerked as Nora pushed it down the gravel road—the babies undisturbed. Maybe this was why Mack hadn't used it much. The wheels were quite small, so every rock could be felt underneath them. But Nora had gotten them all outside,

and that was a feat in itself.

"So what are you going to do about the babies?" her mother asked as they walked.

"Would it be crazy to raise them?" Nora asked.

"Three infants on your own?" her mother asked.

"Three infants, you and me."

Her mother didn't answer right away, and sadness welled up inside Nora. It was crazy. And it was too much to ask of her mom right now. Maybe ever. Her mother reached over and put a hand on top of Nora's on the stroller handle.

"I've missed you," Dina said quietly. "It's nice to have you home."

It wasn't an answer—not directly, at least—but it was clear enough. They were still on opposite sides, it seemed, even with the babies. But Nora had always been stubborn, and she wasn't willing to let this go gracefully.

"I came home because I thought you'd help me," Nora pressed.

"And I will. As much as I can."

They all had limits to what they could give, and Nora had taken on more than she could possibly handle on her own. The problem was that she was already falling in love with these little girls. With every bottle, every diaper change, every snuggle and coo and cry, her heart was becoming more and more entwined with theirs. But was keeping them the right choice?

The strawberry patch was on the far side of the main house,

and Nora parked the stroller in the shade of an apple tree then moved into the sunshine where Dina had the buckets waiting. Dina came back over to the stroller and squatted down in front of it. Sadness welled in her eyes as she looked at the sleeping infants.

"I get it," Dina said, glancing up at her daughter. "When I first held you, I fell in love, too. It couldn't be helped."

"They're sweet," Nora said, a catch in her voice.

"Adorable." Her mother rose to her feet again and sighed. "Your dad would have—" Dina's chin quivered and she turned away.

"Dad would probably have hidden them," Nora said bitterly. Mia had told her enough to be clear that Cliff had known about her existence, even if they'd never met. "He hid his daughter, why should his granddaughters be any different?"

That secrecy—the whole other family—stabbed at a tender place in Nora's heart. How was it possible for a man to have secrets that large and never let on? Didn't he feel guilty about it? Didn't something inside him jab just a little bit when he sat in church on Sunday? He had a reputation in this town, and this didn't line up with the way people saw him. She hoped that he did feel guilt—the kind to keep him up at night—because this wasn't just his private mistake; this had affected them all.

"Let's pick berries," her mother said.

But hidden or not, Nora's father would have fallen in love with these baby girls, too. He'd probably cherished a secret love for the daughter he'd never met. And hidden that love. So many lies

by omission...

"Mom, if Dad had lived," Nora said, grabbing an ice cream pail and squatting at the start of a row, "what would you have done? I mean if Mia had suddenly dropped on our doorstep and announced herself, what then?"

"I'd have divorced him." There was steel in Dina's voice, and she grabbed a pail and crouched down next to Nora. They spread the leaves apart and began picking plump, red berries. "I had no idea he had someone else..."

"Mia said he wasn't in her life at all, though," Nora said. "Maybe the affair wasn't long-term."

Her mother shook her head. "I don't care how long it was. When your husband sleeps with someone else, there is nothing casual about it. It's no accident, either. He chose to do the one thing that would tear my heart in two. He chose it."

"Do you hate him now?"

Her mother's voice was quiet. "I do this morning."

The berries were plentiful, and they picked in silence for a few minutes. Nora's mind was moving over her plans. If she kept these babies, she'd need help. She'd taken her twelve weeks of parental leave from her bookkeeping job, but when she went back to work again, she'd be paying for three children in day care. She couldn't afford that...not on her middling salary, and certainly not as a single mom. Staying in Hope to raise the girls would be the smart choice, but she hadn't taken her mother's emotional state into the equation. She didn't have her mother's

support in keeping the babies, and she didn't have that little homestead where she could have set up house. She didn't have a job here, either, besides the family ranch. So she'd come home, unsure what the next step should be, but certain that this was the place where she could make her decisions.

They were halfway down the second row, six buckets filled with ripe, plump berries, when a neighbor's truck pulled into the drive.

"It's Jennifer," Dina said, glancing up. Then she added with a dry tone, "Great."

The neighbor woman hopped out of her truck and waved, then headed across the lawn toward them. She wore a pair of jeans and a loose tank top, a pair of gardening gloves shoved into her back pocket. She was also Dina's second cousin twice removed or something to that effect.

"Morning!" Jennifer called. She was in her early fifties, and her hair was iron gray, pulled back with a couple of barrettes.

"Morning." Dina looked less enthusiastic, but she met Jennifer's gaze evenly. "What brings you by?"

"Curiosity." Jennifer peered behind them at the stroller. "I heard about the triplets."

Nora watched as her mother pushed herself to her feet. It was already out there—their deepest pain being bandied about by the local gossips.

"Well..." Dina seemed at a loss for words.

"They're sleeping right now," Nora said, and she led Jennifer

toward the stroller.

The older woman looked down at them then glanced at Dina.

"I had no idea Cliff was that kind of man. To live with a man for what—thirty-five years?—and you'd think you knew him."

"You'd think," Dina replied drily.

"So what happened?" Jennifer asked, plucking a berry from one of the filled buckets and tugging off the stem. "Did you see the signs?" She popped the strawberry into her mouth.

"Of my husband fathering another child?" Dina asked, anger sparking under the sadness. "What would that look like exactly, Jen?"

Jennifer's ex-husband was a known philanderer, while Nora's parents had always appeared to be the most devoted couple. Nora had never seen her parents fight—not once. Her father was a tough, unbending man, but somehow he and Dina could look at each other and come to a decision without saying a word. People commented on the strength of that marriage. Jennifer and Paul, however—everyone knew what Paul did on the side. And Jennifer and Paul had very public arguments about it on a regular basis.

"Paul was obvious," Jennifer retorted. "Cliff wasn't. I can normally point out a cheating man a mile away—I mean, I'm kind enough not to tell the wife, but I can spot it. Cliff didn't seem like the type."

Jennifer was enjoying this—there was a glimmer of gaiety under the external show of concern, the cheeriness of not being

the one in the crosshairs for a change. But this was Nora's father being torn apart...and Nora couldn't help feeling a strange combination of anger at her dad and protectiveness toward him at the same time. He deserved to be raked across the coals—by Dina and Nora, not the town. He was theirs to resent, to hate, to love, to be furious with. The town of Hope, for all its good intentions, could bloody well back off.

"I don't want to talk about it," Dina replied shortly.

"Oh, I get it, I get it..." Jennifer hunched down next to a row of strawberry plants and beckoned toward the pile of empty buckets. "Pass me one, would you? I'll give you a hand."

They wouldn't get rid of her easily, it seemed, and Nora exchanged a look with her mother. This wasn't just her mother's shame, it was Nora's, too. Cliff had left them in this strange position of being pitied, watched, gossiped over. And in spite of it all, he was still her dad. Besides, she couldn't help but feel a little bit responsible for bringing this gossip down onto her mother's head, because she'd been the one to bring the babies here. Without the babies, no one would have been the wiser.

"It's scary," Jennifer prattled on, accepting a bucket and starting to pick. "I mean, will it affect the will? Do you remember the exact wording? Because if the wording is about 'children' in general, it includes any children he's had outside of wedlock, too. But if he names Nora specifically..."

There wasn't much choice but to keep picking, and Nora realized with a rush that keeping these babies in the family

wouldn't be as simple as winning her mother over. Dina wasn't the only one who would be thinking about Cliff's infidelity when she looked at those girls—the entire town would.

Those babies represented a man's fall from grace, a besmirched reputation and hearts mangled in collateral damage. It wasn't that this town was cruel, it was that a sordid scandal was interesting, and people couldn't help but enjoy it a little. Gossip fueled Hope, Montana, and these three innocent babies had just brought enough fuel to last for years.

"You know what, Jennifer?" Nora rose to her feet and wiped the dirt off her knees. "I think Mom and I have it from here. Thanks, though."

The older woman looked startled then mildly embarrassed.

"Oh...yes, of course."

Jennifer wiped her own knees off and took some long steps over the rows of strawberry plants until she was on the grass again. They had an awkward goodbye, and then Jennifer headed back toward her vehicle. The gossip would be less congenial now, but it would have spiraled down into something nastier sooner or later anyway.

"Let's go eat some strawberries, Mom," Nora said, turning toward her mother. "And I want to sit with you on the step and dip our strawberries in whipped cream. Like we used to."

She wanted that whipped cream so badly that she ached. She wanted to rewind those angst-filled teenage years and bring back the sunny, breezy days where she'd been oblivious to heartbreak

—when both of them had been. She wanted her mom—that calming influence, the woman who always had an answer for everything, even if that answer was "Some things we don't need to know."

"Okay." Dina nodded, and tears came to her eyes.

Everything had changed on them, spun and tipped. But they could drag some of it back, like whipped cream and strawberries on a warm August day.

* * *

THAT AFTERNOON EASTON came back to the house, his body aching from a day of hard work. He'd ridden Scarlet over to the southwest pasture to check up on the fence that was being rebuilt. Scarlet was his favorite horse; he'd bought her from the Mason ranch five years ago, and he and that horse had a bond stronger than most people shared. Scarlet was a good listener—recently, Easton had started talking. Not to people, but letting the thoughts form words and then spill out of him was cathartic. He could see why Nora had relied on him to just listen for all those years.

Out at the southwest corner, one of the ranch hands had broken a finger, so Easton sent him back, called the medic and took his place for the afternoon with the pole driver. He'd have to fill out a pile of paperwork for the injury, but the fence was complete and all in all it had been a good day.

Now, as he ambled up the drive toward the house, he was ready for a quiet evening. But he had to admit, he'd been thinking

of Nora all day. He'd gotten used to her hurried trips back to the ranch, that wave across the yard. He'd made his peace with the fact that their friendship was something from long ago when she needed someone to listen to her problems. It had never been a terribly reciprocal friendship. He'd been quiet by nature, and she'd never asked too many questions. Maybe she'd assumed all was fine in his world because he didn't feel the need to vent.

As he came closer to the house he could hear the chorus of baby wails. Wow—it sounded like all three of them were crying. He picked up his pace, concerned that something might be wrong, and when he emerged from the mudroom, he was met by Nora's frantic face.

She stood in the middle of the kitchen—two babies crying from their little reclined bouncy chairs on the floor, and Bobbie in Nora's arms, also wailing.

"Everything okay?" Easton asked, dropping his hat onto a hook.

"No!" Nora looked ready to cry herself. "They've been like this for an hour...more? What time is it?"

"Almost five," he said.

"I'm so tired..." She patted Bobbie's diapered bottom and looked helplessly at the other two.

He couldn't very well leave them like that, and seeing those little squished faces all wet with tears, tiny tongues quivering with the intensity of their sobs, made him want to do something. He didn't know how to soothe an infant, but he could pick one up. He

bent and scooped up the baby closest—Riley, he thought. But he could be wrong. He tipped her forward onto his chest and patted her back.

"Hey, there..." he murmured, looking down at her. She didn't look any happier, and he followed Nora's example and bounced himself up and down a couple of times to see if that improved the situation.

Nada.

He hadn't meant to start singing, but a tune came into his head in the same rhythm of his movement—a song he hadn't heard in a long, long time. Brahms's "Lullaby." He hummed it at first, and Riley stopped her hiccoughy sobs and listened, so he started to sing softly.

"Lullaby and good-night, hush my darling is sleeping.

On his sheets, white as cream, and his head full of dreams.

Lullaby and good-night..."

The baby lay her face against his chest and heaved in some shaky breaths. It was working—she liked the song...

He looked up to see Nora staring at him, an odd look on her face. She looked almost soothed, herself.

"I have an idea," she said, pointing to the couch in the living room. "Go sit there."

He did as she asked and sank into the couch. She deposited Bobbie next to her sister on his chest, and Bobbie had a similar reaction as Riley had, calming, blinking, listening as he sang. It was unexpectedly comfortable—the weight off his feet, two

babies on his chest. Rosie still wailed from the kitchen, but when Nora scooped her up, she calmed down a little, and when Nora sank onto the cushion next to him, Rosie seemed to be lulled into quiet, too.

He sang the only verse he knew of that song a few times and the babies' eyes drooped heavier and heavier until they fell asleep, exhausted from their crying.

"I didn't know you could sing," Nora said softly.

"You never asked." He shot her a smile. "You know that cowboys sing. It soothes the herd."

"But they don't all sing well," she countered.

He chuckled softly. "I break it out when absolutely necessary."

There was an awful lot she didn't know about him. He knew more about her—she'd opened up with him. He knew that she hated sappy songs but loved sappy books, that her first horse had been her best friend and that her dad had been her hero. She'd talked and talked... But as he sat here with her, the babies breathing in a gentle rhythm, he wished he'd said more back then. She'd taken more than she'd given, but that hadn't been her fault. He'd given and given, and never asked for anything in return. Ever. Maybe he should have asked.

"I heard that song on TV years ago," he said. "I was maybe ten or eleven. I thought it was so beautiful that I nearly cried. So I tried to remember the words to it but could only remember the one verse. I imagined that one day my mother would come back and sing that song to me."

“Did you ever hear from her?” Nora asked quietly.

He shook his head. “Nope.”

His mother left when he was eight, and he didn’t have a solid memory of her. He knew what she looked like from the pictures, a woman with curly hair and glasses, one crooked tooth in the front that made her smile look impish. Those photos replaced his memories of her somehow—maybe because he’d spent more time with the pictures than the woman herself. His father had destroyed the other photos. “She left us,” he used to say. “Don’t even bother trying to remember her. She sure isn’t thinking about us.”

Easton couldn’t trust his memories of her. He’d made up so many stories about her, so many situations that had never really happened, that he almost believed them. In his imagination, she was gentle and soft, and she stroked his hair away from his face. In his imagination, she loved him so devoutly that she’d never leave. When he lay in his bed at night, his dad drinking in front of the TV, he used to close his eyes and pretend that his mother was sitting on the edge of his bed, asking about his day. He’d imagined that well into his teen years...longer than he should have needed it.

“Do you know why she left?” Nora asked.

“She and Dad both drank a lot. They fought pretty viciously. I don’t know. She left a note that just said that she’d had enough. She was leaving, and we shouldn’t try to find her.”

“But she didn’t take you with her,” Nora pointed out.

Easton had questioned that over the years. If life was such hell here in Hope, why wouldn't she take her little boy along? Why would she leave him like that? She'd walked out, and he'd been left with an alcoholic father who could barely function. It was selfish. If she hadn't loved Dad, he could understand that. But why hadn't she loved him?

"Yeah..." He didn't have anything else to say to that. It was a fact—she'd left him behind.

"Do you remember her?" she asked.

"Not much," he admitted. "My dad dumped her stuff out into a pile and burned it. I guess that was cathartic for him. I managed to sneak off with one of her shirts—some discarded thing she didn't feel like bringing with her, I guess. I kept it under my mattress. It smelled like her cigarettes. I have that still."

"Why didn't I know about this?" Nora murmured.

A better question was, why had he told her now? Nora came from a loving home with parents who both adored her. Her family ran the ranch very successfully, and she'd had a bright future. He'd had none of those things, and yet he was still willing to be there for her, give her whatever support she needed. Why? Because he'd been in love with her, and maybe deep down he was afraid that if she knew the mess inside him, it would turn her off him.

"That's not how we worked, you and I," he said after a moment.

"Meaning I was self-involved." She winced. "I'm sorry. I must

have been."

He shook his head. "I don't know. You were used to happier days than I was. You were more easily disappointed."

"I wish I'd been a better friend," she said.

But it wasn't friendship that would have soothed his teenage soul. If she'd been a more attentive friend, it might have made it harder. He might have actually held out hope that she'd see more in him. But being six inches shorter with a face full of acne had taken care of that.

"It's okay," he said. "It was a long time ago."

Easton needed to be careful, though, because not much had changed. She was still the heir to the ranch he worked, she was still the much loved daughter of the owner and she still needed his emotional support right now...except he wasn't so naive this time around. He knew how this ended. Nora would pull things together and she'd step out into that bright future of hers, leaving him right where he'd always been—on the ranch. She'd walk away again, and she wouldn't think to look back.

"You have the magic touch with the babies," she said, easing herself forward to stand up. "Thank you."

"No problem." What else was he supposed to do when three tiny girls had taken over his home? She walked toward the stairs with Bobbie in her arms.

"Why didn't you call your mom when the babies wouldn't stop crying?" he asked, and she looked back.

"Because she isn't really on board with this. Getting my mom's

help isn't as great a solution as I thought. If I'm going to raise these girls, I'll have to figure out a way to do it on my own."

He'd suspected as much. While she'd probably pitch in, it was a bit much to expect Dina to joyfully embrace raising her late husband's other family.

"I'll get them back up to the crib," she said. "I'll be back."

And she disappeared from the room. He wasn't a long-term solution, either. He never had been, not in her eyes, and he wasn't about to make the same mistake he'd made as a teen. He didn't cross oceans for someone who wouldn't jump a puddle for him. Not anymore.

Chapter Four

That night Nora had managed to feed the babies without waking Easton, and when she got up again for their 6 a.m. feeding, Easton was gone, leaving behind percolated coffee cooling on the stove while he did his chores. She'd gone back to bed—her theory had been right and exhaustion made sleep possible—and when she opened her eyes at eight and got dressed, she'd found another pot of coffee freshly percolated on the stove. He'd been back, it seemed. And he'd be back for this pot, too, but she took a cup of coffee anyway—she desperately needed the caffeine kick.

The house felt more familiar without Easton around, and she stood in the kitchen, soaking in the rays of sunlight that slanted through the kitchen window, warming her toes. She sipped the coffee from a mug that said Save a Cow, Eat a Vegetarian. That

was a sample of Easton's humor, apparently. She let her gaze flow over the details of this kitchen that she'd always loved...like the curtains that she'd sewn as a kid with the flying bluebird–patterned fabric. She'd made them in home ec, and she'd been so proud of them, despite the wandering hemline and the fact that one side was shorter than the other.

He kept those.

It was strange, because Easton hadn't kept much else of the original decor—not that she could blame him. The furniture and kitchenware had all been castoffs from the main house. Anything of value—sentimental or otherwise—had been distributed amongst the extended family when Great-Granny passed away. Easton's furniture was all new, and the kitchen had gleaming pots and pans. The dishes in the cupboard were a simple set of four of each dish, but they had obviously been recently purchased except for a few well-worn mugs like the one she was using now. There had been some renovations, too—fresh paint, some added built-in benches in the mudroom. He'd taken pride in this place.

And yet the floor was the same—patches worn in the linoleum by the fridge and stove. Though freshly painted, the windowsills still had that worn dip in the centers from decades of elbows and scrubbing. Nora used to stand by those windows while her elderly great-grandmother baked in the sweltering kitchen. She used to scoot past the fridge, wondering if Granny would catch her if she snagged another creamsicle. This old place held so

many childhood memories, so many family stories that started with “When Great-Granny and Great-Grandpa lived in the old house...”

It felt strangely right to come back to this place, or it would have if Easton didn’t live here. If her father had just done the normal thing and left everything to his wife, then she would be settling in here on her own—her future much easier to handle because of this family touchstone. But it wasn’t hers—it wasn’t theirs. Instead she felt like an interloper. She still felt like she needed permission to open the fridge.

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