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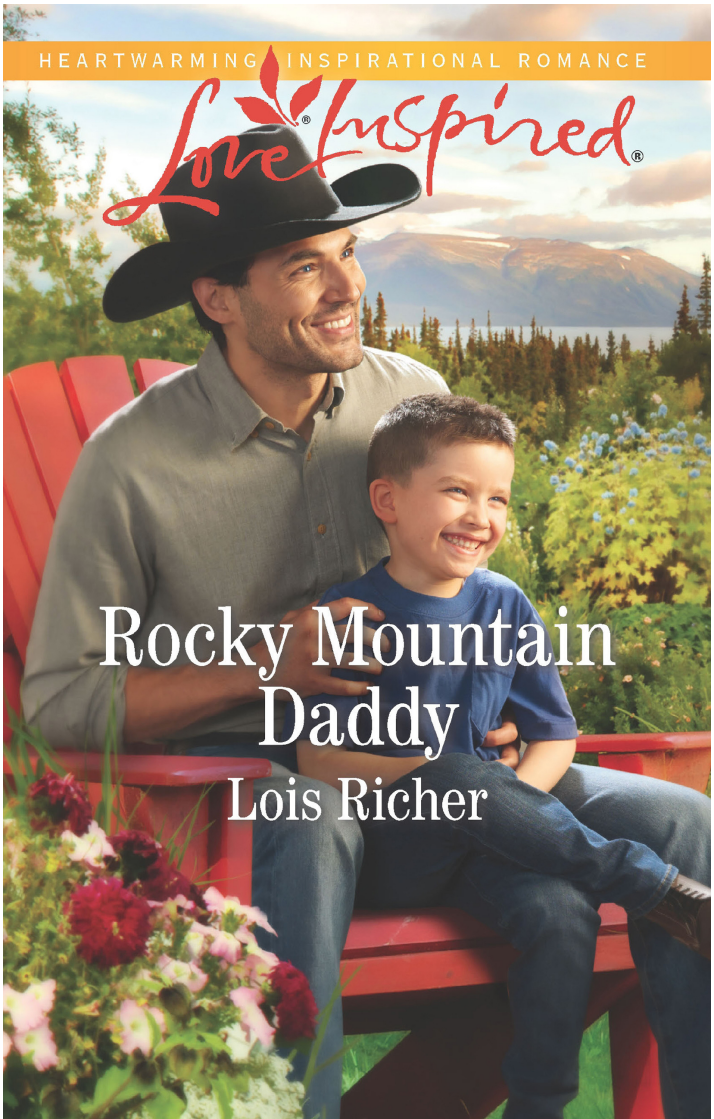

Rocky Mountain Daddy

Lois Richer

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Серия «Mills & Boon Love Inspired»

Серия «Rocky Mountain Haven», книга 3

Аннотация

A secret son makes him a daddy…In this Rocky Mountain Haven novel.Running a horse-riding program for foster youths, Gabe Webber is used to children–but fathering the six-year-old son he just met is completely different. Gabe needs a woman's help…but not a wife. Temporarily home at her foster family's retreat, Olivia DeWitt is afraid of motherhood, but this father and son touch her heart. Will they show her there's nothing more precious than family?

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A secret son makes him a daddy...

In this **Rocky Mountain Haven** novel

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

Also By Lois Richer

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www.millsandboon.co.uk
ISBN: 978-1-474-09623-2
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Published in Great Britain 2019
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Version: 2020-03-02

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"I think this house is perfect for both of you," Olivia said. "You can build a deck in front and enjoy your meals with friends."

"Would you come if we invited you, Olivia?"

"Of course." The way he was watching her sent a tiny thrill up her spine, but it also triggered wariness. She didn't belong here, yet his words created an irresistible picture.

"And I could put up Christmas decorations outside."

"You can do whatever you want. It's your land and it will be your home."

"Home," Gabe whispered. "It's been a long time since I had that. I don't think I'd have done this without you. I don't know how we'll ever repay you."

"Just be happy. Enjoy your home and Eli. That's payment

enough." Her total focus was on Gabe, on how she'd only have to balance forward on her tiptoes to touch his cheek with her lips.

Been that route before, her brain warned. Remember the pain.

Olivia knew lots about Gabe, including his painful past. Which was why Gabe wasn't interested in her as anything other than a friend.

That was what Olivia wanted, too.

Wasn't it?

Dear Reader,

Hello! Welcome back to my Rocky Mountain sanctuary, The Haven, a place of respite for foster children. I hope you enjoyed Olivia's journey to find out where she belonged, and Gabe's struggle to forgive when the cost was so great. And Eli's search—to find a home.

The past year has brought loss and birth to our family, struggles and blessings. And yet, God is always there for us to cast our cares on Him because He cares for us. I hope that you have found His solace in your life's journey. Please join me again soon for Gemma's story, the final book in this series.

I'd be delighted to hear from you via my website at www.loisricher.com, email at loisricher@gmail.com or by snail mail at Lois Richer, Box 639, Nipawin, Sask. Canada S0E 1E0. It's always a blessing to hear from readers and I'll do my best to respond quickly.

Until we meet again, may you know the everlasting love, joy and peace that God offers to all His children.

Blessings,
Lois Richer
What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.
—Psalms 56:3
For Mom, who wrote her last chapter so well.
And for Oliver, who's just begun his own story.
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Chapter One

One minute Olivia DeWitt was happily steering her car up the hill toward home, the next minute she was heading for the ditch.

With a gasp of dismay she slammed on her brakes, managing to stay on the road shoulder—barely. She exhaled, slowly released her fingers from the wheel and then exited the car. The sight of the shredded tire made her groan.

"You couldn't have waited ten minutes before blowing?" Shielding her eyes, Olivia peered longingly at—was it still home?—The Haven, a massive stone house perched on the rocky mountain promontory above her. "At least it's summer," she consoled herself, then mocked the sentiment as a teasing breeze reminded her that June in the Canadian Rockies bore no resemblance to June in the eastern provinces.

For a microsecond Olivia considered calling The Haven and asking Jake, her foster aunts' handyman, to come and help her. Until a glance at her phone showed it was dead. Again. Not that it mattered, because she had no intention of calling.

Olivia never took the easy way out. She prided herself on being responsible and that included fixing a tire, even though she'd have to completely unpack her fully laden car to retrieve her spare.

"Nothing good comes easily," she reminded herself with a weary sigh.

Olivia had her hand on the trunk latch when a rumble to her right made her pause. A half-ton truck beetled toward her, leaving behind a massive dust plume from the bumpy dirt track—well, you could hardly call it a road.

Some might say you could hardly call the vehicle a truck. Rusted-out fenders, splotches of turquoise paint dabbed here and there—probably to contain the rust—and a cracked windshield numbered among its less noteworthy features.

"At least *his* vehicle is running," she chastised herself.

He was Gabe Webber, foreman of the Double M, the sprawling ranch next door to The Haven. Olivia knew him, but only casually. Gabe had been employed after she and her foster sisters Victoria, Adele and Gemma had left The Haven to attend university.

Years ago, when they were not quite teens, Olivia and the other girls had been brought here by Tillie and Margaret Spenser, former missionaries and aging owners of the huge stone house and pristinely forested estate known as The Haven. Despite their being dubbed *troublemakers* in the foster care system, the four girls had bonded while the Spenser sisters, whom they affectionately called "the aunties," sheltered and lovingly raised them as if they were all part of one big family. Those precious years had created a debt none of the four girls could ever hope to repay.

Over a year ago the aunties had come up with a plan to sponsor an outreach program at The Haven, a way to offer respite to

troubled foster children. Victoria had set that plan into motion. Then last fall, Adele, Olivia's second foster sister, came on board as the food and beverage manager. In a recent phone call to Olivia, Victoria had raved that the foster kids who now came to The Haven on a weekend, or for weeklong programs, loved the addition of trail rides to their activities, and she'd given a big part of the credit to the Double M foreman, Gabe.

Olivia was happy for Victoria and Adele and The Haven's success, but she didn't intend to become part of it. Olivia didn't do responsibility for kids. Never again.

Gabe's battered truck pulled up behind her car, motor purring smoothly. He climbed out. Six feet four inches and leaner than lean, Gabe Webber was always the image that came to mind when Olivia thought "cowboy." Handsome and hunky, his crisp dark hair glistened in the sunshine as he whipped off his black Stetson and smiled at her.

"Hello, Olivia. Nice to see you. Having trouble?" he asked in a low rumbly voice.

Funny that she'd never noticed how deep his voice was.

"Hi, Gabe." Olivia glanced at him and then quickly away, lifting one hand to make sure her hair covered her scarred cheek. Gabe had seen the scar before, of course, and never once had he made her feel uncomfortable about it, but her actions stemmed from a lifelong habit.

"My tire blew," she explained. "I was about to dig out the spare."

"I see that. I hear you're making a move to Edmonton." Gabe assessed the damage, running one gloved fingertip over the shredded tire. "Starting a new job, your aunts said?"

"That's the plan," Olivia agreed. "I need to find an apartment and get settled in before I start work, but first I wanted to stop by The Haven and see everyone."

"Organizing people, is that what you do?" Gabe clapped on his Stetson, then shoved it to the back of his head, sky-blue eyes darkening as he studied her nod.

"Sort of. My official title was systems analyst, but the job was more about being an administrative assistant to a colonel." She shrugged. "I was tasked with making his office run more efficiently." *Too much information, Olivia.*

"Uh-huh." Gabe blinked. "Been a long time since you were here, Liv. Your Aunt Tillie and Aunt Margaret miss you." His intense gaze shifted to scrutinize the other tires. Bald tires.

"I miss my aunties, too, but it wasn't always easy to get here from Ottawa," she defended. *Please don't say I should have bought new tires.* She'd used a hefty chunk of her precious savings to store her furniture and fund her move far away from the man to whom she'd given her heart, the one who'd lied about loving her. Edmonton would be her fresh start. "How've you been, Gabe?"

"Busy. Since the Double M started offering trail rides, Victoria keeps us hopping." His droll, dry comment didn't tell Olivia he was joking, but his slow, easy smile did. "I make time to come over to The Haven every week on Fridays, though.

Doughnut afternoons." Gabe licked his full lips and grinned, white teeth blazing against his tanned skin. "Chef Adele makes the best glazed doughnuts. Besides, I enjoy her kids. Those twins are quite a pair."

"Yes, they are." Olivia barely knew her adopted niece and nephew, Francie and Franklyn, but that was by choice. If she didn't get too close to them, she couldn't wreck their worlds as she'd done to other kids. She pushed up her sleeves. "I guess I'd better change—"

Her words were cut short by the squeal of tires as a dusty white SUV barreled off the highway and around the corner. It slid to a halt mere inches from Olivia's back bumper. She and Gabe both stared as a woman got out and marched toward them.

"Lady, you have to slow down around here. There could be a horse wandering in the road and if you hit it, you'd be in trouble and so would it." Gabe sounded irritated, which Olivia thought was odd for what she'd always thought such an easygoing guy. But then this cowboy loved horses as much as other people loved their kids.

The woman seemed unfazed. "I'm looking for a Gabriel Webber."

"You found him." Gabe frowned at her. "What can I—?"

The words died on his lips as the woman racewalked around the front of her vehicle to the passenger side. She yanked open the back door and a moment later dragged forward a small boy and an equally small battered suitcase.

“This is your son, Eli,” she announced.

“I’m sorry, lady, you’ve got the wrong guy.” Gabe began shaking his head, but the woman interrupted.

“Eve’s son. Your son.” She stared at him hard. “Eli’s almost six.”

Olivia’s head had been swiveling back and forth between them, trying to figure out what was happening. At the word *Eve*, Gabe stiffened, but at the word *six* his face seemed to freeze.

“Impossible,” he finally whispered, blanching.

“Possible.” The woman nodded. “I’m Eve’s sister, Kathy Kane. We’ve never met, though we might have if you’d had a proper wedding instead of dragging my sister to some unsavory elopement and then dumping her when she got pregnant.” When she received no response to her angry criticism she continued. “I live in Calgary now. Where Eve lived.”

“Lived?” Gabe squinted at her. His face tightened into a mask, giving away nothing. He glanced at the boy again. “She’s not living there now?”

“Eve died a month ago. She had cancer.”

Olivia knew less than nothing about raising kids, but she immediately knew it wasn’t right that the woman said the words so baldly, without even a hand on the shoulder to comfort the boy. And yet, Eli seemed untouched by the remark about his mother’s passing. He just stood where he was, staring at the ground, his little face pinched and sad.

“I’m sorry,” Gabe murmured.

“Me, too. She left a mess behind.” Kathy Kane was not a soft-spoken woman; nor did she make any effort to conceal her irritation. “I’ll clean it up. But I can’t stay and talk. I’ve got two kids at home and the neighbor will only watch them for a while longer. I’ve got to go. Wait.” She went back to the car.

For a moment Olivia thought Gabe feared she’d leave because he leaned forward as if he’d go after her. But Kathy returned quickly, carrying a huge handbag into which she dug furtively for a few moments before producing a bedraggled envelope.

“Eve left you this. It’ll explain everything. I wrote my information on the back, just in case you need to contact me, though I’d rather you didn’t. I’ve done enough.” She stepped forward, thrust the envelope at Gabe, her jaw tight. “Don’t bring him back,” she growled, her voice low and threatening. “I can’t keep him. I got enough trouble raising my own kids and paying all Eve’s bills.”

“But—”

“You be good,” Kathy said to Eli, her fingers clutching his shoulder.

Olivia saw the boy wince.

“This is your dad. You’re gonna live with him, like we talked about. Bye.” Without another word or even an embrace, Kathy wheeled around, climbed into her car and roared back to the corner. She disappeared down the highway.

Olivia remained silent, embarrassed that she’d witnessed the incident. Gabe’s frigid expression kept her from offering her

sympathy, but then as he studied Eli, his icy appearance began to melt and soften. Longing filled his blue eyes—as if he couldn't quite believe his dreams had just come true. Several long moments stretched until finally Gabe walked up to the boy and squatted in front of him.

"Hello, Eli. I'm very pleased to meet you. My name is Gabe Webber." He held out a hand, withdrew it quickly to strip off his leather work glove, then thrust it out again and waited.

Olivia caught her breath when Eli looked up, staring into intense blue eyes that were an exact replica of his own. Their jutting chins had the same hard line. Dark crisp curls flopped onto prominent brows in an identical manner. The child was a mirror image of Gabe. There could be no doubt that man and boy were related.

"Are you really my dad?" Eli's murmur barely carried over the freshening wind whispering across the foothill grasses.

"That's what your aunt said." Gabe let his unshaken hand drop. "I'll have to read your mom's letter before I know more." He gulped, then added very quietly, "But I guess I am your father, Eli."

Big fat tears began to course down Eli's cheeks. His shoulders sagged.

"Why didn't you come?" he asked, his voice breaking on a sob. "I prayed and prayed. Why didn't you come?"

Then, like a broken reed that just couldn't hold itself up anymore, the little boy collapsed in a heap, sobbing his heart out.

* * *

He had a son.

Gabe stared at Eli while his brain mentally regressed to the day he'd handed Eve a copy of their divorce decree. He could still hear her voice.

You'll be sorry, Gabe.

No, Eve. I won't. I wish our marriage could have worked out, because I loved you. But you don't want me. You only ever wanted what Dad's ranch could give you—money. Now you have it, though the stress and pain you've caused us will cost us a lot more than those few dollars you grabbed at. Goodbye, Eve.

Then he'd waited for her to leave. Had she already known she was pregnant?

"Gabe?" Olivia's soft voice cracked the mirror of his past. She moved closer to meet his gaze, her silver-gray eyes clouded as she glanced pointedly at the sobbing child. "Do something," she whispered.

"I don't know—" He spread his hands helplessly. The kid wouldn't even shake his hand. What was he supposed to do?

"Oh, for mercy's—" Obviously exasperated, she walked to Eli and squatted in front of him. "Eli? My name is Olivia DeWitt. My aunties live in that great big house up there. See it?"

Eli paused in his weeping, looked up and nodded with a sniff.

"It's called The Haven," Olivia continued. "My sister is making doughnuts there today. Would you like to go with me and have some?"

Gabe stared. He hadn't seen Olivia interact with kids much. She always seemed aloof, or perhaps *standoffish* was more accurate. Yet here she was offering to take his son—*his son?*—for doughnuts. Just another thing his brain couldn't seem to process.

"The thing is, Eli, my car has a flat tire. We'll have to ride up there with Gabe in his truck. Okay?" she asked.

"Uh-huh." Eli scrubbed away the tears, which left dirt streaks across his face. He stared at Gabe. "Is he my dad for sure?" he whispered.

"I don't know, but why don't we forget about that for now and go enjoy the doughnuts. Maybe some lemonade, too. Deal?" Olivia held out a hand and, to Gabe's shock, Eli shook it.

They rose together. To Gabe it was as if some invisible bond stretched between them. A bond he hadn't been able to achieve. That stung.

"Could you drive us, please, Gabe?" Olivia asked, locking up her vehicle. "I'll leave my car here for now. Gabe?" she prodded when he didn't respond.

"What? Uh, drive. Sure." He could hardly tear his gaze away from the boy. His son.

God, I'm going to need some help here.

He put Eli's small shabby suitcase in the truck bed without saying anything more, mostly because he couldn't think of anything appropriate. And yet, as he drove to The Haven, a million questions rolled inside his head. *Why?* That was the most

pressing of them all. It seemed that his questions, like Eve's letter in his pocket, would have to wait till later.

Eve. Every nerve in Gabe's body tensed. Anger surged and the knot in his stomach tightened. *Deceiver. Cheater. Liar.* She'd been all of those, so why was he surprised by this? He clenched his jaw, braking a little harder than he should have in front of the huge stone house.

"Livvie!" Tillie and Margaret Spenser jumped up from the shaded cedar bench outside the back door. Both rushed toward them as Gabe parked and walked around to open Olivia's door.

"Another of our dear girls is home," Aunt Tillie gushed.

"Just for a week," Olivia said as she released Gabe's helping hand.

He thought that sounded like a warning.

"But—"

"My dear aunties, Victoria, and Adele have made their lives at The Haven and I'm very happy for them and you." Olivia interrupted Margaret as she hugged her close. "But Gemma and I are still the family's wanderers. I'm home for a visit, then I'll have to leave here to start my job. But having two of your four foster daughters living here permanently isn't bad, is it?" she teased.

"It's wonderful. All part of our God's glorious plan, my dear. Where's your car?" Tillie Spenser asked as she followed her sister in hugging Olivia.

"Bottom of the hill. Blown tire."

Olivia's unconcealed chagrin made Gabe smile, until Tillie

released her and included him in the hugfest. Then she bent to study Eli.

"Hello, young man. Welcome to The Haven. It's doughnut day, did you know that?"

"She said," Eli responded, shooting a small smile at Olivia. The smile disappeared when he looked at Gabe.

"This is Eli," Olivia explained. "He'll be joining us," she managed to say just before being encircled by Adele's adopted twins, Francie and Franklyn, who'd come racing around the side of the house.

Gabe noted how quickly Olivia drew away from them.

"Hey, guys, you're kinda dirty," she said, nose wrinkling at the muddy streaks on her formerly pristine white shirt.

"Yeah. Choc'late mud pies." Francie grinned. "We gotta wash 'fore we c'n eat doughnuts," she told Eli.

"It's a rule," Franklyn agreed.

Gabe had loved the twins from the moment Adele arrived with them over six months ago. He couldn't have been happier when she'd married his boss, Mac McDowell, owner of the Double M, because it meant the cute pair now lived on the ranch. He loved kids, had always wanted some of his own, but Eve—*don't go there.*

He had a son. Gabe couldn't make that sink into his brain. Nor could he comprehend why Eve hadn't told him, especially after she'd become ill.

"Come on." Francie grabbed Eli's hand. "Washup time. An'

don't miss no dirt 'cause we can't eat nothin' till we get clean an' the doughnuts are yummy." She whirled to inspect the adults. "Uncle Gabe, you got dust on your cheek. You gotta wash, too."

"Yup, you do," Franklyn agreed. He grabbed Eli's other hand and drew him alongside, discussing crash-up cars. Eli went along with a confused look on his face.

"Let's do have some doughnuts," Aunt Margaret said. She and her sister followed the kids inside. Only Gabe and Olivia remained.

"I figured you wouldn't want to explain to them about Eli until you have everything sorted out," she said quietly.

"Thanks." He could feel her questions.

"I didn't know you'd been married, Gabe."

"At eighteen. For about three years." Because she'd witnessed the debacle with Kathy, Gabe figured he owed Olivia at least a rudimentary explanation. "Eve was the new girl in town and I fell hard for her. My dad didn't approve, though. We eloped, then she moved onto our ranch. I'd worked the ranch with Dad my whole life and I loved it, but Eve said it was boring and hated it. She started to cause problems—on the ranch and between Dad and me. I finally realized that when she looked at me, all she saw was a meal ticket."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Me, too." He pursed his lips. Best to get it said and then forget it. As if! "Eve wanted out, so Dad agreed to sell off part of our land to pay her off. She took the money and ran, but Dad's

treasure, our ranch, was decimated. We couldn't ranch on so little land, though he fought hard to make it work. Six months later he died from a massive coronary. I had to sell the land at rock-bottom prices."

"Oh, no." Olivia sounded genuinely upset. "What did you do then?"

"Enlisted. Did two tours, but I hated it. I worked at Wranglers Ranch in Tucson for a while. Tried to rebuild my faith in God." He heaved a sigh. "Then I got into equine-assisted learning. Eventually I came to the Double M and—" He shrugged. "That's my story. My stupidity in marrying Eve cost me my dad and my home."

"I'm so sorry. You never saw Eve again?"

"No. And I never wanted to," he muttered, tension building in his head. "Until today," he grated.

"You never fell in love again?" Olivia's hand went up in the automatic way she had of smoothing her hair over her damaged cheek. Funny, but unless she drew attention to it, Gabe never even noticed her scar.

"No." Even now, memories of that youthful over-the-top love and the gut-wrenching pain of knowing it wasn't reciprocated burned inside. "Eve ended my dreams of love and family. I grew up fast and I gave up dreaming." The words emerged sounding bitter. But then he had a right to be bitter, even more so now.

Why didn't you tell me we have a son, Eve?

"And that's enough for you?" she asked, a frown marring her

beauty.

“I have a good job with horses, which I love. I live in a great community and I get to be part of The Haven’s ministry. Someday I’d like to have my own spread, but...” He shrugged. “Really, why do I need a house and land?”

“I’m sorry, Gabe.” Olivia’s softly voiced words offered comfort, but he wouldn’t take it.

“So am I. My stupidity in marrying Eve killed my dad. I’ll never forgive her for that.” Why had he told Olivia that? What good did it do? Out of the corner of his eye he saw Eli standing in the doorway. Surely the boy hadn’t overheard his snarky comment? “Let’s go enjoy those doughnuts,” he said with forced cheerfulness.

“Wait.” She stepped forward to rub the dust from his cheek. “Now the twins will allow you to eat doughnuts,” Olivia said with a grin.

Truth be told, Gabe wasn’t sure he could swallow anything right now. What he desperately wanted was to lose himself in the forest surrounding them and read the letter that burned a hole in his shirt pocket.

Later, he promised himself grimly. He’d read Eve’s paltry excuses for keeping his son a secret later.

Chapter Two

"Is Eli staying here?" Victoria asked Olivia later that afternoon.

Olivia sat on the deck beside her sister, basking in the warmth of the sun, shielded from any breeze by The Haven.

"Not that he isn't welcome," Victoria backtracked. "Everyone's welcome at The Haven. But the aunties have some guests arriving tomorrow..."

"I don't have any answers, Vic." Olivia knew her sister's frown meant she'd demand some explanation, so she relayed the events of Eli's arrival.

"Gabe's a daddy?" Victoria grinned. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy. He's great with kids."

"Well, he sure doesn't seem to know what to do with Eli." Olivia remembered the devastated look on the cowboy's face when Eli hadn't shaken his hand. Then she remembered Eli's pitiful sob. "There's something going on with that child, though I'm not sure what that is."

Victoria's adopted son, Mikey, was playing with Francie and Franklyn on the jungle gym equipment about six feet away. Eli stood apart, watching them.

"Probably after such a loss it will take him a while to feel his way. Most kids are like that." Vic smiled at her daughter, Grace, who was learning to walk. "Don't worry. Gabe will make him

feel welcome. Meanwhile, your timing in coming home couldn't be better."

"Why?" There was a note in her sister's voice that worried Olivia. "What's going on, Vic?"

"The aunts' lawyers and accountants are coming to check out everything at the end of the month, to make sure The Haven's outreach program complies with all government rules." Victoria winced. "The office is a mess, Livvie. It just isn't my gift," she defended herself when Olivia frowned. "I can never seem to get the paper under control. I've been late filing a couple of forms, too." Her head drooped.

"I'll take a look." Olivia smiled at her sister's relief. "Why didn't you hire an assistant?"

"I did. She made things worse. Triple booked us at Easter. Forgot to mention she'd confirmed four military visitors were coming when we were already full. Can you say *nightmare*?" Victoria rolled her eyes.

"I'll set up some better systems, see if that—Hey, where's he going?"

"Who?" Victoria tracked her gaze. "Gabe? He has eyes like a hawk. Probably sees something down there. Maybe I'd better take a look." She lifted Grace and stretched as if to hand her over, but Olivia didn't move. She couldn't take her niece because warning bells filled her head.

"Leave Gabe, Vic. Eli's aunt gave him a letter from his ex. I'm guessing the poor guy needs a few moments to read it and figure

out what's what." Olivia couldn't stop herself from chucking the darling little girl under the chin. "Miss Grace looks like Ben."

"Good. My husband is very handsome." Vic frowned. "Still have your aversion to kids, huh, Liv?" she asked sympathetically.

"It's not an aversion. How could anyone have an aversion to this sweetheart?" Heart aching, Olivia smiled at Grace and then sighed, knowing she wasn't fooling Victoria. "It's pure fear and you know it. I'm terrified to be responsible for any kid."

"Because of what happened years ago when you babysat in those foster homes." Victoria covered Olivia's hand. "Sweetie, the kid that died in the fire—you were too young to be looking after anybody back then, and his death was an accident. The child that drowned—that didn't happen because of anything you did, either."

Vic had pried the truth of Olivia's ugly past out of her when they were fourteen.

"But I was in charge—"

"The point is, you shouldn't have been, Liv. The authorities even said so. You were a strong, competent and responsible kid, yes, but you weren't the adult in that home. Those parents were wrong to blame you. *They* should have been watching their kid *and* you *and* the pool. It wasn't fair to expect you to be in charge. The fire was an accident and it was not your fault." Vic patted her shoulder.

"Maybe. But it doesn't change anything inside my head, Vic. Caring for kids, being responsible for them still terrifies me."

Olivia rose, uneasy with those awful memories and unwilling to revisit them. “It’s just the way I am. Sorry.” She made a face at Grace, who only giggled.

“But to keep avoiding children means this fear robs you... Livvie, don’t you want to have your own children someday?”

“No!” Seeing that her sharp response had drawn frowns from the kids, Olivia smiled at them reassuringly before resuming her seat. She wasn’t going to tell Vic about Martin or that she’d given up on marriage because he’d pretended he wanted to marry her even though he was already married to and living with someone else. *Betrayer*. “I just want to start my new job, prove myself and earn the things I’ve never had.”

“Things are worth more than family?” Vic sounded disapproving.

“No, and it’s not a competition. It’s just—it’s best for me.” She shrugged, relieved to see Gabe emerge from the woods, though he wasn’t alone. “Looks like he found some stragglers,” she mused.

“Those two again.” Victoria stood, her lips pressed tight together. “That pair has caused more than enough problems today.”

“I doubt they’ve done anything as bad as what we did at that summer camp, before the aunties brought us here,” Olivia reminded. “We four girls terrorized everyone.”

“True. Think this is my payback?” With Grace in her arms, Victoria straightened her shoulders before striding forward to

meet the threesome. She listened to what Gabe said, shook her head at the pair and ushered them to the meadow where they were supposed to be learning to rock climb with their group.

Olivia watched it play out, marveling at her sister's ease in handling these troubled youth. Judging by the slump of their shoulders as they walked down the path with her, the two had been strongly chastised.

"Vic's good at this job, isn't she?" Olivia murmured, her gaze now focused on Gabe. His attention seemed riveted on his son.

"Vic's like your aunts. A dragon lady lives under that big generous smile of hers." Gabe glanced at her, then back to Eli. "Any trouble?"

"With Francie and Franklyn in charge?" She rolled her eyes. "Not yet, but there will be. Did you read your letter?"

"Didn't get a chance before I found those two."

"What are you going to do about Eli?" Olivia was curious to hear his plans.

"Ask the aunts if he can stay here, I guess." He shrugged at her surprise. "I live in a bunkhouse, Olivia. There's barely room to turn around let alone fit in a kid. It never mattered before, but—"

"It does now. You need to start looking for a home." She could see the idea surprised him. "He's a little boy, Gabe. He's been pulled from the only place he knew. He needs his own home. With his father."

"What kind of a home?" He shrugged at her confused look. "I'm clueless. I've been saving for my own spread for years, but

—”

“Buy it,” she interrupted.

“Can’t. I’ve never found what I want. But even if I had, I have to consider...things.”

“Such as?” Why did she feel he was hesitating?

“Such as—it might be dangerous for a kid from the city to live on a ranch. Maybe a temporary place in town is better.” Gabe’s suddenly narrowed stare made Olivia uncomfortable. “You wouldn’t have time to help me look, would you?”

“Me?” Olivia blinked. “What do I know about finding a home for a little boy?”

“Probably more than me. It doesn’t have to be right away,” Gabe quickly added. “Eli could stay here for a while. Your aunts wouldn’t mind. In fact, it might be better if he settled in here.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Olivia wasn’t sure why it felt so important to get Eli into a home of his own with his father. Maybe it was because she’d sensed an inner angst in the child. Or maybe it was because at Eli’s age she’d always longed to belong to someone. Or maybe it was Gabe himself.

Granted, she didn’t know him well, but she’d always thought him too easygoing, too laid-back, too prepared to wait for things instead of making them happen, like staying in a bunkhouse instead of getting the spread he obviously wanted.

Kathy had said Eli was almost six. Hadn’t father and son waited long enough?

“Why wouldn’t it be good for him to stay here long-term?”

Gabe frowned at her.

"Because though he's welcome, Eli's a visitor here. Kids need a place where they feel secure. Being shunted around, not having a permanent parent in his life, nothing to call his own—that's no way to start off your life together. That boy needs a home of his own, with you, his dad. Pronto."

"Strong feelings much?" Gabe's blue eyes twinkled. "So, you're offering to help?"

She'd fallen right into that. Olivia sighed.

"Fine. I'll help you look for a place to live, Gabe. But that's all. I won't help you decorate it or buy furniture for it or any of that stuff." As if she had any clue as to how to make a house into a home for a cowboy and a kid. Organizing systems, creating efficiency, that was her specialty. Not helping somebody belong.

"Okay," the big cowboy agreed easily. "I can always ask salesclerks about furniture."

Oh, brother.

"This home is for you and Eli. You should make the decisions about it together. You do know I'm leaving soon, probably next week, but for sure no later than the end of June."

"When do you want to start looking? Tomorrow?" And she'd thought Gabe laid-back. "I'm off in the afternoon." He looked very eager now.

After her first glance at Eli, Olivia had wanted to help him. But she didn't do kids. Fear of the past happening again, of being responsible and failing, kept her from interacting with her own

nieces and nephews. What was so different about Eli that he made her feel he needed her?

Olivia exhaled. She had no idea why this child tugged at her heart. All she knew was that she had to do what she could. And the sooner she helped Eli, the sooner she'd feel okay about leaving The Haven to get on with building her future. Alone. As usual.

Helping Gabe had nothing to do with it.

"Tomorrow afternoon is good," she agreed.

* * *

Gabe,

First, I apologize. I should have told you about Eli years ago. But you had your dad and your ranch. Eli was all I had. I guess I wanted to punish you for not making me stay with you, so I kept the two of you apart. That was stupid and selfish. All I did was cheat my son of knowing his father, someone he's asked about since he first learned to speak. I cheated you of knowing him, too, and I'm so sorry. He's a wonderful boy, Gabe. So curious, so generous. His heart is so tender. Now he's hurting, worried that I'm dying, and he'll be left all alone.

I wish I'd eaten my pride ages ago, but now it's too late. I'm too ill to come and find you. I'm in hospice and there are days I can hardly lift my head. I can barely hug Eli, so I tell him that I love him and that one day you'll come for him. I don't know where you are, Gabe, but I pray that somehow God will bring you and our child together. God is my best friend now. You're the one

who first introduced us, remember? My favorite Bible verse is, "He hath made everything beautiful in His time." God will do that with you and Eli, I know it. Forget about me and how I ruined things between us and concentrate on this wonderful little boy who needs your love so badly. He needs a dad, too, and I know you'll be a great father. Love him, Gabe.

While I've been ill I had to let my sister care for Eli, but please don't leave our son with Kathy. He has a tender soul and she'll crush him, just as she did me at that age. Contact the lawyer on the card I've included. On my death you'll receive permanent custody of Eli. I so wish I would have told you this in person, but since I can't, this is from my heart. Please, I beg you, love our son. Even if you never forgive me, Gabe, love Eli. He desperately needs you.

Eve

Sitting on his bed in his bunkhouse that evening, Gabe reread Eve's letter several times. Every time he did, the knot of bitterness inside him wound tighter. Simple for Eve to say she was sorry. She was gone. She didn't have to face him; she'd never answer for what she'd done. But he'd lost almost six years of his son's life, six years when he could have watched Eli learn to walk, to talk, call him Daddy, share baby kisses and birthdays.

Forget the past. Focus on Eli, his logical brain ordered. Probably good advice, but Gabe doubted he could ever forget or forgive Eve for what she'd done.

So now what?

Lips pursed, he folded Eve's letter and slid it back into its

envelope. He selected a new envelope and wrote Kathy's address on it. He filled out a check, signed it and slid it inside. Then he added a note. *Use this for whatever you need*. A father should be responsible for his kid's expenses. Better late than never. He sealed the envelope and set it on a shelf, ready to mail.

Eve's letter went into a small bronze box with a lid that Gabe snapped shut before shoving it into a drawer. Though the letter was hidden from his sight, it felt vividly alive in his seething brain.

Head and heart aching, Gabe went outside and sank onto the step, peering into the half-lit sky. Summer nights in the mountains never really got dark. Sunset and sunrise would meet soon. What would tomorrow hold?

"I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord. Thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an unexpected end." That verse had been Gabe's life's motto for years.

You've known about all of this for a long time, Lord. But I'm stunned, he prayed silently. *I've tried to follow You as best I can, but—a son? I never imagined—show me the best way to win his heart. Show me how to be Eli's father, Lord.*

Gabe prayed until there were no more words left. But nervous worry, concern that he'd mess up and perhaps hurt this little boy he didn't even know, plus uncertainty about his suddenly shifting world, did not abate.

His pastor's Sunday-morning sermons last winter had been all about trusting God. Gabe had been so certain he'd been doing

that. But Eli's appearance today had rocked his world and shaken his faith. Almost six years—why had Eve done it? But more importantly, why had God let her? How could he trust God now?

Because a sense of futility hung over him, Gabe shifted his thoughts toward practicalities. How would he know what kind of a place to get for Eli?

Olivia's image flickered through his brain. She didn't seem to hesitate when making decisions. Maybe he could lean on her, let her take the lead in this house-hunting business. After all, she'd grown up at The Haven, certainly the best home in the area. She'd know all the things a good home should have.

The knot inside Gabe eased. Yeah, he'd follow Olivia's lead. Could it be that's why God had brought her back at this particular time? To be a friend? To help him?

Startled by awareness that he was allowing a pretty woman he barely knew to become so involved in his personal life, in direct opposition to everything he'd resolved after Eve's departure and in the years since, Gabe's brain whirled. He'd take Olivia's help, he decided, but he would not allow anything more than friendship between them, because though she was very attractive, romance wasn't for him. Never again would he let himself be that vulnerable.

When he finally retired, sleep was elusive because Gabe knew that no matter how great Olivia was at organizing things, the fact remained that Eli was not a ranch kid. He'd even shied away from Spot and Dot, the Spenser sisters' mild-tempered dogs. What

would happen when the kid met a horse?

Horses were Gabe's world.

Were. But now he had a son. With whom he had nothing in common.

* * *

"This could be doable." The following day Gabe tilted back on his cowboy boot heels, surveyed the interior of the tiny rental house he'd been told about and gulped.

"You're kidding, right?" Olivia bristled with indignation. "You and Eli would have no time to spend together because you'd be constantly repairing something."

"It's a rental, Olivia," he muttered. "*They're* supposed to look after all the maintenance."

"Looks like they're doing a bang-up job," she muttered in disgust, flicking a finger against the peeling countertop, nudging a toe against a loose floorboard and obviously struggling not to inhale the overwhelming odor of too many cats. "Come on, Eli. Let's get out of here," she muttered, and headed out the door, stumbling on the faulty step.

Gabe steadied her before following to stand beside her in the long grass outside, next to Eli, who studied the tilted bilious green house with disapproval.

"That house stinks," his son said, the first words he'd spoken since he'd climbed into Gabe's truck after lunch.

"We'll clean it out," Gabe assured him, striving for a positive tone.

“Not without removing the carpets, curtains and wallpaper, which is what I like to call a gut job.” Obviously repelled, Olivia strode toward the truck. “Moving on.”

So they did move on. And again, several times. After the fourth house, Gabe began to lose hope in his wobbly dream of a home for his son. Olivia found problems with every single rental they viewed. Not that the problems weren’t there. They were, and Gabe knew it. But he had to find a place if he was going to keep Eli with him, if he was going to be a real father.

“Can we stop for coffee, please?” Olivia licked her lips. “I need a break.”

“Sure.” Gabe pulled up in front of the local diner, shoved the gearshift into Park and climbed out. He reached to help Eli, but the boy veered away from him and exited on Olivia’s side. It was one of several signs that Gabe interpreted to mean his son was upset with him, though he couldn’t figure out exactly why that should be.

Inside Olivia chose the best booth in the place, halfway between the entrance and the kitchen with a street view. It was like her to have automatically selected the best one, Gabe thought. She seemed to possess an inner ability that almost unconsciously prioritized every decision she made. Maybe it came from her years of working for the military.

He paused to admire her in the stream of sunshine. She looked lovely. Efficiently lovely, he corrected. Her navy slacks and coordinating navy-and-white sweater set were perfect for

an afternoon of house hunting. Businesslike casual, Gabe would have termed it.

As usual, her hair covered the left side of her face to fall over the scar and tuck under her jaw. For a minute he wondered about that scar and how it had gotten there. Then her glossy dark hair recaptured his attention. On the other side of her face it entwined behind her ear revealing silver-hooped earrings, a perfect complement to the two thin silver chains around her slim neck. Her rust-brown boots looked like they'd be comfortable in whatever terrain they happened upon.

"Do you want milk to drink?" she asked Eli.

"Pop." Eli didn't seem to be requesting.

Olivia glanced at Gabe. He nodded at the server and waited until Olivia ordered coffee, then requested a cup for himself.

"And a large plate of fries, please," he added.

"You're hungry already?" Olivia's eyes stretched wide. She checked the slim silver watch on her wrist. "Lunch was only an hour ago."

"Didn't get any lunch. One of the riders decided he didn't want his lesson to end." Gabe smirked. "But Betsey didn't like it when the kid dug his heels into her side and wouldn't get off. She decided his ride was over."

"What happened?" Eli blinked as if he'd surprised himself with the question.

"Betsey, uh, let him down." Gabe winked at Eli.

"She bucked him off?" Eli's eyes grew huge.

Gabe was about to launch into a full-fledged tale of the event when Olivia cleared her throat. He glanced at her. She shook her head, just once.

"The trail riding horses at the Double M don't buck off their riders. Do they?" she asked Gabe pointedly.

"Uh, no. They're way better trained than that." Gabe smiled at the boy. "Betsey just moved against the rails and rubbed so he had to let go and slide off. But he pretended he was hurt so we had to get him checked out. That was my lunch hour."

"Oh." Eli frowned as he considered that.

"Would you like to learn to ride, Eli?" Olivia smiled as their server brought their drinks and a huge plate of golden fries.

"Uh-uh. Horses are *huge*." Eli helped himself to a fry after Gabe nudged the plate toward him. "How old were you?" he asked his father.

"When I first rode a horse?" It was the first time his son had addressed him directly. Gabe tried to conceal his pleasure and treat the question matter-of-factly. "I was raised on a ranch, Eli. My dad told me he first put me on a horse when I was two. But I don't remember that," he added lest the boy feel intimated.

This fatherhood thing was treacherous. A guy had to be so careful not to say the wrong thing. What should he say next? While he thought it over, Gabe squirted ketchup on the edge of the plate and dipped his fries into it, hoping his stomach would stop that embarrassing growling. He hid his smile when Eli copied his actions by dipping into the ketchup, too.

“Not everyone rides the full-size horses, Eli. There are miniature horses at the Double M, just your size,” Gabe explained. “Francie and Franklyn like to ride them.”

Eli thought that over as he ate more fries.

“What kind of things would you like in the house you live in, Eli?” Olivia’s question startled Gabe, but then he figured it was probably one he should have asked himself. Maybe the kid had preferences.

“Windows.” Eli popped another fry into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “So I can see to draw.”

“You like to draw.” Olivia nodded. “I see. What else would you like?”

“Grass. Mine.” Eli fell silent for a moment. The sad look he gave Olivia tore at Gabe’s heart. “Not just a park.”

“It’s not the same, is it? I lived in an apartment in Ottawa and I loved the park, but having your own yard is way better. Did your aunt have a yard?” she asked nonchalantly.

Not nonchalantly enough, Gabe figured, watching Eli’s face close like a clamshell.

“No.” Eli said nothing else.

And here I’ve lived my life surrounded by grass. I could have... Inside Gabe the nugget of bitterness toward Eve hardened.

“Too bad.” Olivia sipped her coffee. “What other things would you like, Eli?”

“Nobody beside us?” Eli peeked sideways at her, as if he doubted this could be accomplished.

"You mean no neighbors?" When he nodded, she added, "You don't like neighbors?"

"Yelling."

Was it fear that made the kid's eyes so huge? Gabe wondered.

"I don't like yelling, either. What about a pet? A cat maybe?" Olivia ignored Gabe's vigorously shaking head.

What was the woman doing? A house, a kid *and* pets? Gabe cleared his throat, but she ignored him.

"No cat," Eli said firmly.

"Okay. A dog? A horse?" she added, even though Gabe shook his head.

"A canary. I like canaries." Eli licked the ketchup off his fingers, then dug in his pocket. "Like this." His small fingers spread out a sheet of paper on the table to reveal a carefully drawn canary with even the tiny claws sketched out.

"Eli, this is beautiful." Olivia leaned nearer to study the delicate strokes. "Did you used to have a canary?"

"Aunt Kathy did. It died." The words sounded ominous.

"It's a very good drawing," Gabe said quietly. "So you like to draw birds?"

"Uh-huh." Suddenly Eli came alive. "In the house?" he said in a rushed tone.

The house, not *my* house or *our* house, Gabe noted. "Yes?"

"Could I get one of those seats in front of a window to sit and look out? An' maybe a tree?" he added wistfully. "Then when birds come an' sit in the tree, I could draw 'em. I really like

drawing birds."

"We'll put that on the list." Gabe pulled out a small notebook he kept tucked in his shirt pocket. He opened it to a fresh page and dutifully noted *window seat, canary* and *tree*. "They're such small things to want," he said softly to Olivia, who was watching him.

"And such important things," she agreed with a funny smile that half mocked, half shared. Then she said briskly, "That was great coffee. Ready to start looking again, Eli?"

"'Kay." He drank the rest of his soda, ate one more ketchup-laden fry, wiped his fingers carefully on a napkin and then slid out of the booth.

After a rest stop they were back in the truck. Gabe felt a little better about this search now that Eli finally seemed interested, but everything they saw was too small or too dirty or out of his price range.

"I'm sorry," Olivia said as she watched Eli climb back into the truck. "I guess Chokecherry Hollow is such a small town that there aren't many rentals. I should have realized that. Just for curiosity sake, let's drive past the Realtor's office and see what's in the For Sale window."

"Sure." Gabe had already checked the advertisements in the huge picture windows last night, but he pulled up to the curb anyway.

"Maybe we'll see something here that will suit," Olivia murmured.

Gabe doubted that. Most all the ads were for massive spreads with fancy homes and lots of cattle, starting well above seven figures. Way beyond his means. But he would look with her because he knew Olivia well enough now to know she'd insist they leave no stone unturned in their search. Since Eli had fallen asleep, Olivia eased free of him, stepped out of the truck and quietly closed her door. Gabe did the same. They met in front of the windows.

"I had no clue ranch land sold for this much," Olivia gasped after scanning the display, obviously taken aback by the prices.

"They're big spreads. I wouldn't be able to work at the Double M and manage so much land or cattle," Gabe told her.

"You don't want to raise your own herd?" She looked at him with those big silver-gray eyes, as if trying to fathom why he would settle for less than his own animals.

"It takes a while to build a really good herd and lots of money to cover the lean years so, no, I don't. But it's mainly because my interest has always been horses." He shrugged, adding before she could question him, "That also takes lots of cash and time to build your stock."

"I see." She turned back to survey the window once more. A long time passed before she finally faced him. "There's nothing here for us?"

Us. He liked the sound of that. As if he wasn't alone in this new and uncertain world. *But only because she's a friend*, his brain reminded.

Olivia frowned at him, waiting for a response.

Gabe simply shook his head. Together they walked to the truck. He held her door until she was inside, then gently closed it. Once he was behind the wheel again he looked at her.

"I guess that's it," he muttered.

"You're giving up already?" She glared at him, eyes shooting silver sparks. "We've only been looking for what?" She checked her watch. "Three hours. And you still need a place to live with your son. Let's go for a drive."

"A drive?" He wanted to ask why, but faced with her implacable glare, Gabe obediently shifted into gear. "Where to?"

"In the country," was her only directive.

That was fine by Gabe. He never tired of the densely verdant rolling hills, thickets of green trees, lush meadows and rocky peaks where granite foundations thrust into the light.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Olivia breathed reverently. "Ottawa's lovely, too, but I never realized how much I've missed all these wide-open spaces."

"Quite a Creator we have," Gabe agreed.

"Look at that house, nestled against the hillside. It has a wonderful view."

"That's the Browns' place, Evensong. Not much more than a few acres now." Sadness crept through Gabe. "They bought a big spread five years ago to live out their retirement dream, but they've been slowly selling off bits of land to neighbors. Since Mrs. Brown got sick Art just can't handle it all and look after

her."

"Mavis? Isn't that her name?" Olivia smiled at his nod. "I think the aunties mentioned this morning that she's having treatment in Edmonton."

"Yeah. Would you mind if we stopped for a few minutes? I'd like to see if there's anything Art needs help with. I think he's home today to catch up."

Relieved when Olivia nodded her agreement, Gabe pulled into the yard. He usually stopped over to check the few head of cattle grazing in the pasture and sometimes curried the last two horses the Browns owned. The house looked worse than usual in the bright sunlight. It sure could use a coat of paint. Maybe he could manage that this summer. Somehow.

After he'd figured out fatherhood.

As they pulled into the yard, Art Brown emerged from the shed carrying a gas can and a wrench. To Gabe he looked weary beyond belief.

"How are you doing?" he asked after he'd introduced Olivia. Eli was still sleeping.

"Okay. Hated to leave Mavis in Edmonton alone, but she must be close to the hospital for her treatment and I've got to tend things here. All this back and forth is wearing me out," Art admitted, heaving a sigh. "But you don't want to hear my woes. Come on inside and I'll make you a cup of coffee. Place isn't very tidy but—"

"You have the most glorious deck. Do you mind if we sit out

here for a bit? Then Eli, that's Gabe's son, will see us when he wakens. And we had coffee earlier so don't go to any trouble on our account." Olivia's smile seemed to put the fatigued man at ease.

"Okay. Have a seat. Son, huh? Good for you, Gabe." Art sat down gratefully. "Thought maybe I'd mow the yard today. Sure does need it, but that beast won't start." He shook his head at the ancient green ride-on mower sitting in the long grass. "Guess it's getting old, just like me."

"Mind if I take a look?" Gabe asked. He shot Olivia a questioning glance, relieved when she nodded. "Stay here and relax," he ordered Art with a grin. "I'm better if I work alone. Or at least I'm less embarrassed when I can't figure it out."

"Join my club. Have at it." Art stretched out his legs when Gabe stepped off the deck and bent to look at the mower.

"My aunts, Tillie and Margaret, send their best wishes to you and Mavis. They're praying for both of you," Olivia said quietly. "Is there anything we can do to make things easier for you?"

"Everybody's already doing so much," the man said, tears welling at the corners of his eyes. "Embarrassing to ask for more."

"That's what friends are for," Olivia assured him.

Gabe listened in unabashedly, liking the way Olivia deflected the man's concern.

"We'd like to help if we can, Art," she said now. "Please tell us how we can best do that."

Gabe already knew most of the issues at Evensong. He'd been trying to rectify them since the couple had left, but the list seemed to increase daily.

"I'm most worried about the house roof," the retired man admitted. "God's blessed us so far this summer and we haven't had a big deluge. But the next downpour is going to cause huge problems inside." Art hung his head, obviously ashamed he hadn't been able to fix it.

"Don't you dare go up there, Arthur." Gabe called his warning loudly, hoping the older man would heed him. "Climbing on roofs won't help that knee of yours." He glanced at Olivia, surprised to see her writing in a tiny notebook. "We'll get it done," he assured his friend with a grin while wondering, *When?*

"What else needs doing, Art?" Olivia glanced around.

"Well, the cattle and the horses are a worry, of course. Gabe's been great at taking care of them while I'm gone but we can't keep relying on him. Guess I'll have to sell them, though Mavis raised that mare from a foal and she's attached to it—"

"You know I don't mind caring for the animals, Art." Gabe fiddled with the carburetor, then flicked the starter switch. The mower sputtered momentarily but finally came to life. He let it run for a few minutes as he added gas from the nearby can. "I'm going to give it a whirl," he called to the pair on the deck.

He noticed Art start to rise, saw Olivia restrain him with a gentle hand on his arm. Then, heads bent together, the two chatted and Olivia wrote some more in her book. Gabe was

curious about that book, but he concentrated on grass cutting until he saw Eli's head pop up inside the cab. Then he parked the machine, got off and went to his son.

"Ever ridden on a mower?" Gabe asked. Eyes wide, Eli shook his head. "Come on, you can ride with me while we cut this grass for my friend." He explained the rules about riding to Eli, then sat him on the back of the long seat. "Hang on to me now," he ordered, a tiny rush of pleasure surging through him when the small hands wrapped around his waist.

Just then Gabe happened to glance up. Olivia was watching them. She smiled and nodded her approval. For some reason that made him unreasonably happy, and he returned to his mowing with a light heart.

Whatever You have in store for me, God, I thank You for my son and for a friend like Olivia. Underneath that reserve, she's got a good heart.

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