HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Feb 03

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SONG OF HER HEART

IRENE BRAND

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Song of Her Heart

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As a teenager, Norah Williamson believed she had a calling from God, but she had put everything on hold for the sake of her family. Now her obligations were over, and she was finally ready to pursue her own dreams.Widower Mason King had lost all hope of ever seeing his dreams come true– dreams of a Christian wife, and of children growing up to inherit his family' s ranch. The emotions his new cook, Norah, stirred in him were the last thing he' d ever expected to feel again.But whatever Norah and Mason had planned, it looked as though both their futures were in the capable hands of a higher power.

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Содержание

IRENE BRAND 6
Song of Her Heart 7
Contents 8
Chapter One 9
Chapter Two 14
Chapter Three 19
Chapter Four 23
Chapter Five 28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 29

Mason had envisioned Norah as a woman in her sixties who would provide a grandmotherly model for the children in the therapeutic program.

But Norah wasn't grandmotherly. He could hardly believe she was forty-two. Her straight, silvery-gray hair was arranged over her forehead in a wispy mist, then flowed in soft layers to the base of her neck. Her bright, clear blue eyes were highlighted by long black lashes that contrasted with her ivory skin.

Mason had been lonely since his father's death, but he hadn't understood how lonely until Norah had entered his home. Yearnings that Mason thought he'd stifled forever suddenly seemed important again….

IRENE BRAND

Writing has been a lifelong interest of this author, who says that she started her first novel when she was eleven years old and hasn't finished it yet. However, since 1984, she's published twenty-four contemporary and historical novels and three nonfiction titles with publishers such as Zondervan, Thomas Nelson, Barbour, Kregel and Steeple Hill. She started writing professionally in 1977, after she completed her master's degree in history at Marshall University. Irene taught in secondary public schools for twenty-three years, but retired in 1989 to devote herself to writing.

Consistent involvement in the activities of her local church has been a source of inspiration for Irene's work. Traveling with her husband, Rod, to forty-nine of the United States, Hawaii excepted, and to thirty-two foreign countries has also inspired her writing. Irene is grateful to the many readers who have written to say that her inspiring stories and compelling portrayals of characters with strong faith have made a positive impression on their lives. You can write to her at P.O. Box 2770, Southside, WV 25187 or visit her Web site at www.irenebrand.com.

Song of Her Heart
Irene Brand

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I call to remembrance my song in the night:
I commune with mine own heart:
and my spirit made diligent search.
—Psalms 77:6

Thanks to Myra Johnson for sharing information
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Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Epilogue
Letter to Reader

Chapter One

Norah Williamson picked up speed on the unpaved road, topped a small hill and hit the brakes with such force that the seat belt clamped her body in an unyielding grip. She panicked momentarily, finding it hard to breathe.

Blocking the roadway was the most intimidating animal she'd ever seen in her life—an enormous white-faced red bull with white patches on his chest, flanks and lower legs. Curled forward around his face were two ominous-looking horns. To Norah, the animal appeared to be gigantic as an elephant, although when she recovered from her initial shock, she realized he wasn't really that big.

Her brother's accusation flashed through Norah's mind. When Sam had learned that she'd put the family home in Springfield, Missouri, on the market and was going to take a job on a ranch in northern Nebraska, he'd said, with biting sarcasm, "You're nothing but a foolish old maid, searching for a dream that vanished twenty-five years ago."

Norah wasn't sure she'd ever forgive Sam for that remark, nor did she remind him that he was one of the reasons she'd lost her dream. But now, stranded in the middle of a sea of grassland, her way obstructed by a Hereford bull, she conceded that Sam's assessment might very well describe her situation.

After leisurely driving for two hours through Nebraska's Sand Hills, enjoying the spring flowers that dotted the fields of waving grass, pausing often to watch white-tailed deer bounding across the prairie, Norah had become a bit concerned when she realized that darkness was approaching. She'd started wondering how long it had been since she'd seen another car or even a driveway into a ranch. She'd noticed several towns of black-tailed prairie dogs, hundreds of birds on the roadside lakes and herds of white-faced cattle, but no signs of human habitation. This rangeland was overwhelming to a woman who'd lived all of her forty-two years in a city.

Her concern had lightened when she'd seen a mailbox beside the road and a sign indicating that the Flying K ranch, her destination, was three miles away. But right now she was stranded in the middle of nowhere because of this bull.

Knowing she couldn't spend the night in a standoff with the animal, she blew the horn. He shook his head, bellowed and moved forward menacingly, shoving his huge head and shoulders over the hood of her small car. Eyeball to eyeball with the beast, she raced the engine, backed up quickly and started to pass on the right side. But instead of going forward, the car slid sideways into a deep ditch, startling a grouse from her nest in a clump of grass.

The bull ambled to the side of the road and peered down at her. Norah cowered, body trembling, expecting him to attack the car at any moment. If he did, her ten-year-old compact vehicle wouldn't provide much protection. She closed her eyes and leaned her head on the steering wheel.

"God," Norah prayed aloud, "what am I going to do? In spite of my family's displeasure with me, I'm convinced it's Your will for me to take this job. I need help."

The car was slanted at a forty-five-degree angle, and the left wheels of the vehicle were suspended several inches above the ground. She shut off the car's engine, resigned to spend the night in this position if she had to.

Opening the window a sliver, Norah detected the sound of an approaching vehicle, and saw dual head-lights bounding up and down across the prairie. A red pickup ground to a halt, and a large, blackwhiskered man, garbed in jeans, brown jacket, boots and a wide-brimmed hat, jumped from the truck and swatted the bull across the rear. The bull ambled to one side as the man slid down the incline toward her.

An honest-to-goodness cowboy had come to the rescue!

He bent over and peered in the window. "Ma'am, are you hurt?" he asked in a deep voice that sounded as if it came from the bottom of a well.

Relieved to know that help had come, laughing and crying at the same time, Norah gulped. “I don’t think so.”

When he stood, he towered over the car, and all Norah could see of her rescuer was a broad chest encased in a vivid blue shirt. The stranger quickly surveyed the situation and asked, “What happened?”

“That bull was in the middle of the road, and when I tried to drive around him, my car slid into the ditch.”

“I’ll have you out of there in a few minutes.”

His deep, matter-of-fact voice encouraged Norah. She knew she was in safe hands, but she still didn’t trust the bull.

“I’m not getting out of this car as long as that animal is here. I’m afraid of him.”

The man peered in the window again, and his eyes widened in surprise. Although it was dusky, Norah could see that his eyes were almost as dark as his whiskers. “Afraid of Buster? He’s gentle as a lamb.”

“Ha!” she said derisively. “He shook his head and glowered at me through the windshield.”

“Just Buster’s way of welcoming you to the Flying K ranch. If you’d waited a few minutes, he’d have moved aside.”

The stranger pulled the door open and gave Norah a strong hand to hold as she unsteadily climbed out of the car and up the steep, slippery bank.

“Then I have arrived at the Flying K ranch?”

He leaned forward and peered at Norah’s face. “You headin’ for the Flying K? I supposed you’d taken a wrong turn. What’d you say your name was?”

“I didn’t say, but it’s Norah Williamson.”

The man shoved back his hat, revealing a broad forehead. A bewildered grin spread across his face, and he reached out his hand. “Well! Welcome to the Flying K ranch, Norah. I’m Mason King. Somehow I was expecting an older woman.”

With those black whiskers covering three-fourths of his face, it was hard to tell how old Mason was, but the part of his face she could see was unwrinkled, his body was firm and agile and he walked with a youthful tread. She hadn’t thought much about Mason’s age, but it was obvious he was in his prime.

“I guess we didn’t get around to exchanging ages in our e-mails,” Norah said. “I’m forty-two.”

“Then I’m three years ahead of you.” He turned toward the ditch. “I’ll soon have your car out of there. You’re sure you’re not hurt?”

“I don’t seem to be. The car slid slowly down the hill.”

“It’s been raining off and on for a week, and the ground is soaked. Most times you wouldn’t have had any trouble.”

From his truck bed littered with a conglomeration of ranch equipment, including rope, nail kegs, wire and shovels, Mason pulled out a long chain. He attached it to her car, then fastened the chain to a hook on the back of his truck.

“Stand aside now, and I’ll get your car out on the road again. There doesn’t seem to be much damage.”

While the pickup slowly lifted the car from the ditch, Norah kept a wary eye on Buster, now grazing contentedly in the knee-high grass beside the road. Buster glanced in her direction occasionally and let out a throaty bellow. The noise irritated her. After all, he was the reason for her misfortune, and he needn’t gloat over it.

Mason circled the car, kicking at the tires and peering underneath. She couldn’t tell if the car was damaged, because the whole right side was covered with mud where it had landed against the bank.

Agitated, Norah looked out into the darkness settling around them. She'd wrecked her car and was at the mercy of this stranger. Why had she made the decision to come to this remote place?

"There's a dent in one fender, but it'll run all right," Mason said. "It's too late to settle you at the Bar 8 ranch tonight, so I reckon you'll have to bunk at the Flying K. Are you okay to drive to the ranch? It's only another mile."

Still preoccupied with her awkward situation, Norah mumbled, "I'll be all right if I don't encounter another bull."

Mason answered with a pleasant laugh, and he opened the door for her. "You'll get used to cattle after you've been here a few weeks." He closed her door and got into his truck, motioning for her to follow him.

Fearing the darkness around her, Norah's hands gripped the steering wheel. The only light she could see came from the truck in front of her, and the blackness of the night in these unfamiliar surroundings intimidated her. After a short drive, Mason turned toward several buildings illuminated by security lights. He jumped from the truck and waved Norah to a parking space beside him.

"I'm not fixed for company," he explained as he opened the car door, "but we can manage tonight. Wait until I get a light turned on in the house, and then I'll help you carry in what you need for overnight."

"Do you live here alone?" Norah asked, hoping the agitation she felt didn't register in her voice.

"Yes."

The low, rambling house had a wide veranda running the length of the building. When Mason turned on a light, despite Norah's concern, the old, one-story weathered home seemed to welcome her.

Mason was at her side again by the time she stepped out of the car. "I won't need anything except that small case," she said, indicating a piece of luggage on the floor.

He peered inside the loaded car. "Looks like you came to stay, all right," he said with approval.

"I hardly knew what I'd need, so I prepared for every possibility."

Norah entered a room that spread across the front of the house—kitchen, dining and living area were combined into one open space. It was definitely a man's home. Hunting trophies were displayed over the stone mantel that topped a cavernous fireplace. A wide-screen television was placed where it could be seen from the kitchen table or from a large lounge chair arranged between the television and the fireplace. The walls were lined with plaques attesting to the Flying K's superiority in cattle raising.

Cereal and cracker boxes, and peanut butter and jelly jars were on the table. Stacks of newspapers and magazines covered a large library table. The room was a combination of antique and new items, including a modern refrigerator, stove, microwave and an extensive computer center.

"Have you had your supper?" Mason asked.

"I stopped in Broken Bow for a late-afternoon lunch," Norah said. "I'm not really hungry."

"Well, I am," Mason said. "I've been out on the range all day, and I didn't take time to eat. I'll rustle up something and you can eat with me. Let me show you to a bedroom."

Carrying her bag, he went down the hall ahead of her and opened a door into a small room that was sparsely furnished with a bed, dresser, two chairs and a table.

"I don't have company often," he apologized, "so the bed isn't ready for sleeping. There are sheets and pillowcases in the dresser. A neighbor comes in once a month to clean the house, and she was here last week, so the room should be all right."

"I'll be fine," Norah assured him. "If I'd realized how far it was to the ranch, I'd have stayed in Broken Bow. I'm sorry to impose on you."

"No bother!" he assured her. "If you can manage tonight, we'll make better arrangements tomorrow. The bathroom's across the hall. Come into the kitchen when you're ready."

He went out and closed the door and Norah stood in the middle of the room, not knowing what to do. She'd be spending the night unchaperoned in the house with Mason King. Norah wasn't a prude, but Mason was a stranger to her—a man she'd contacted a month ago on the Internet. Norah

had counted on finding a motel where she could spend the night. She hadn't realized how sparsely settled Nebraska's Sand Hills were, and she'd arrived at the Flying K ranch before she found a motel. There wasn't anything else to do but to make the best of an awkward situation.

After living all of her life surrounded by family, what had prompted her to strike out on her own to cook for a rehabilitation organization experimenting in equine therapy for children with special needs? Sam might have been right—maybe she was a foolish old maid.

She hung her jacket on a clothing rack in the corner of the room and took a set of sheets, pillowcases and a blanket from the dresser. The linens felt cold and she laid them on the bed. She'd make the bed later.

A tantalizing scent of cooking beef welcomed her return to the kitchen. "Anything I can do to help?" she offered.

"It's all ready," Mason said. "I use the microwave a lot." The two plates he placed on the wooden table held steaks and baked potatoes. He took a loaf of bread, a carton of butter and a deli container of coleslaw from the refrigerator.

"Think this is enough to hold you until morning?"

"More than enough."

Mason pulled out a chair for Norah, sat opposite her and bowed his head. "God, thank You for giving Norah a safe journey. We ask Your guidance for this project we're undertaking. Thanks for the food and bless it to our body's use. Amen."

Mason's prayer, indicating a deep spiritual devotion, set Norah's mind at ease about the propriety of spending the night in his home. She settled back to enjoy her meal.

"I don't know why you advertised for a cook," she said. "This food is delicious."

"I can't run a cattle ranch and cook for a bunch of kids. Besides, I'm a meat-and-potatoes guy. Anything else is beyond me. My friends Doug and Sheila Johnson live on my other ranch, and they invite me for a good meal about every week. I eat out whenever I go to town, but the rest of the time I just get by."

After they'd eaten, refusing Norah's offer of help, Mason efficiently cleared the table and put their dishes and utensils in the dishwasher.

"The days are still cool, so I like a fire in the evenings." He turned the lounge chair to face the fireplace, placed another comfortable chair beside it for Norah and held a match to the stacked wood.

"Let's sit and relax while we get acquainted."

"That's a good idea. I'm not an impulsive person, so I even surprised myself when I accepted this job without learning more about what I was getting into."

Nodding, Mason answered, "I'm sometimes impulsive, too. For instance, I bought a dude ranch, the Bar 8, which adjoins my property, about four years ago. I operated it as a dude ranch for two summers, which was nothing but an aggravation to me. I couldn't find good help, and I was spending time entertaining city people when I should have been taking care of my cattle."

One of the logs crumbled and sparks wafted up the chimney. A puff of smoke fanned out into the room, and Mason rearranged the firewood with a poker.

"I'd already listed the property for sale," Mason continued, "when Horses and Healing, a Christian group of therapists in Omaha, contacted me, asking to use the ranch for a pilot project in equine therapy for children with special needs. They offered a good rent for the summer months, and when I learned my only obligation was to provide horses and a cook for the riders and volunteers, I temporarily took the property off the market. When you answered my ad and said that you'd taken care of your handicapped brother, I figured you'd relate to the children and not find it difficult to work with them."

"Because of my experience with Billy, I'm very interested in any program designed to make life better for children with special needs. I was at loose ends after my father and brother both died

this past winter. When I saw your ad, I felt it was the place for me. I needed a job, and since I'd managed our home after my mother died twenty-five years ago, I felt I was qualified."

"I'm sure you are, and it'll be a pleasure to have you here," Mason said. "If we can make a difference in the lives of a few children, it'll be worth the work. And we'll also be serving Jesus, for He said, 'Whatever you've done for one of these little ones, you've done to me.'"

"I believe that, too. I've been thinking of the summer's work as a ministry rather than a job."

If it was too late to realize her goal of serving as an overseas missionary, would this short-term position, helping children with handicaps, compensate for her lost dream? Surely a few months away from familiar surroundings would be an opportunity to assess her future options and decide how to achieve reconciliation with her family.

Chapter Two

Although he'd had a long, hard day, Mason mused before the fire for more than an hour after Norah went to bed. The pleasant murmur of her velvet voice revolved over and over in his mind, a comforting sound that had wiggled its way into the loneliness of his heart. This was the first time a woman had spent the night in his home since his wife had died years ago, a few hours after she'd delivered their stillborn child.

Mason had longed for children, and the possibility of remarriage had often crossed his mind. He'd stopped mourning his young wife long ago, and he would have married if only he'd found a woman to spark his interest. For a few years, he'd considered getting married just so he could have a family, and he'd dated, but he couldn't bring himself to propose to a woman he didn't love.

Mason had believed it was important for him to marry because he was an only child and had no children. He often worried about what would happen to the Flying K after his death. He and his father had spent their lives building up this property, and he didn't want the ranch to pass to someone he didn't know.

But when he reached forty, Mason had decided that he'd passed the age when he could satisfactorily rear a child, and he'd put the idea of marriage on the back burner. But now Norah had come!

Was her arrival providential? He'd received six answers to his Internet ad, but none of the messages had seemed right until Norah had written. He took her message from his desk and read it again.

Mr. King,

Having cared for my father and siblings, including a disabled brother, for several years, I believe I qualify for the job you mentioned in your ad. I've never been employed outside the home, so I can't supply work references. The pastor of my church can furnish a character recommendation.

She'd given the pastor's name and e-mail address, but Mason hadn't contacted the man. He and Norah had corresponded several times by e-mail, and he'd anticipated her arrival with pleasure. Mason had envisioned Norah as a woman in her sixties, who would provide a grandmotherly model for the children in the therapeutic program.

Norah didn't impress him as the grandmotherly type. He could hardly believe she was forty-two years old. Her straight, silvery-gray hair—no doubt prematurely gray—was neatly arranged over her forehead in a wispy mist, then flowed neatly in soft layers to the base of her neck. Her bright, clear-blue eyes were highlighted by long, black lashes that created a startling contrast as they caressed her wellmodeled ivory face. She was of medium height with a winsome body.

Being a large man, Mason had never been attracted to petite, delicate women who looked like a strong prairie wind would blow them away. Norah Williamson filled the physical qualities he admired in a woman—although not obese, she carried enough flesh that a man could have an armful when he hugged her.

While they'd sat at the table visiting, and later relaxing by the fire, Mason realized that, for the first time, this house seemed like a home. His mother had died when Mason was a child, and he didn't even remember her. During the year he'd been married, he and his wife had lived in a small house a few miles away. After her death, he'd moved in with his father. Mason had been lonely since his father's death, but he hadn't understood how lonely until Norah had entered his home. Yearnings that Mason thought he'd stifled forever suddenly seemed important again, and he stayed in his easy chair long after the embers of the fire had faded away.

The room was totally dark when Norah awakened, and she was terrified. Realization came quickly that she wasn't in her bed at home, but on an isolated ranch in northern Nebraska. The awareness did nothing to calm her nerves. She hastily turned on the light that was hooked over the

wooden headboard of the bed, and her racing heartbeat eased when the light chased the darkness away.

She lifted her watch from the bedside table. Four o'clock! After spending a restless night, Norah longed for daylight and the start of a new day. She'd still been awake when Mason had entered his bedroom across the hallway, and although she'd dozed several times, thoughts of Mason had been present in her mind all night.

Occupied as she'd been with caring for her family, Norah hadn't made many male friends, so she was unprepared for her physical reaction to Mason's rugged personality. His wide shoulders were slightly stooped, but his rangy body towered several inches over six feet. Obviously a powerful man, Mason was a product of the rangeland where he and his ancestors had battled the elements to make a home. His black whiskers and hair were tinged with gray, and his generous mouth and dark brown eyes were touched with humor. But in spite of his vigorous masculinity, she detected a hint of wistfulness in Mason's gentle expression, as if he was searching for something that evaded him. He obviously was a successful rancher, but was he happy?

Disgusted that she'd allowed thoughts of Mason to keep her awake, Norah flopped over on her side and hoped for sleep, but concern about the uncertainty of her future wouldn't let her rest.

She was committed to working for Mason during the summer, but what then? Knowing that she didn't have enough education to become a missionary kept Norah wide-awake. She'd hoped to use the money from the sale of the family home to prepare for her lifelong dream of becoming a missionary. But was she too old to work on the overseas mission field? It would take several years to receive the education she needed for mission appointment, and by that time she'd be almost fifty years old. What could a woman in midlife do to make her life count?

Hearing a soft knock on the door, Norah roused from her catnap.

"Yes," she answered sleepily.

"I'm going to the barn," Mason said. "I'll be back in an hour, and we can have breakfast. But if you're tired, go back to sleep."

"No, I'm ready to get up."

The room was cold, and after she heard Mason's deliberate tread outside the window, Norah put on her robe and hustled into the bathroom across the hall. After a shower, she put on the extra change of clothes she'd packed in the small bag. A pair of jeans and a plaid, long-sleeved shirt seemed suitable attire for a ranch cook, she thought humorously as she walked toward the kitchen.

From the many boxes of dry cereal on the table, she concluded Mason didn't often have a hot breakfast. The refrigerator contained what she needed to prepare an omelette and mix a batch of bread. She put the biscuits in the oven, thinking she could warm them in the microwave if they baked before Mason finished his work. She found honey and oleo in the fridge and put them on the table, made a pot of coffee and prepared a pan for the omelette. Ready to finish breakfast when Mason came, Norah sat on a wide window seat to watch for him.

Low rolling hills surrounded the Flying K ranch that was located in the Niobrara River Valley. A large red barn with a tall silo attached and several smaller buildings were near the house. A wide shelter belt of evergreens was positioned to protect the ranch headquarters from northwest winter winds. Sunlight was just beginning to illuminate the meadowy fields where a herd of cattle grazed, and Norah wondered if Buster was among them. In the light of day, her fear of the bull seemed a little foolish, but the sudden sight of him in the middle of the road had overwhelmed her.

When Mason emerged from the barn, he was accompanied by two black Labrador dogs that frolicked at his heels all the way to the house. When Norah opened the door and said, "Good morning," the dogs froze in place. Mason stooped to lay calming hands on their heads.

"It's okay," he assured the animals. Smiling at Norah, he continued. "Around here, the dogs get their breakfast before I do." He dipped some dry dog food from a container and filled a couple

of bowls. He turned on a faucet and replenished the dogs' water pans. Patting their heads again, he stepped inside and came to a standstill, almost as quickly as the dogs had done.

"You've made breakfast!"

"Why not? You need a sample of my cooking to see if I'm suited for the job. If not, you can hire someone else before the kids come to the ranch."

Smiling, he said, "If the food tastes as good as it smells, I won't want to hire anyone else."

"Everything's finished except the omelette. I'll have it on the table by the time you've washed up."

"Even biscuits!" Mason marveled as he returned from the bathroom and pulled up to the table. "I make biscuits once in a while, but they don't look like these."

Since he usually ate alone, Mason didn't talk much while he ate three-fourths of the omelette, several biscuits and downed two cups of coffee. By the time only one biscuit was left on the plate, Norah didn't need any more evidence that her cooking passed muster.

When Mason leaned back from the table, with a satisfied smile on his face, Norah filled his coffee cup for the third time.

"I've never eaten a better meal in my life," Mason said. "Thanks, Norah. If the therapy program doesn't improve the kids' health, eating your meals is bound to be good for them. Thanks for coming to help."

A song rose in Norah's heart at his praise. In spite of her efforts to please her family, she'd seldom had any thanks for what she'd done for them. Her father had paid her for taking care of the household, but it always rankled that her family had taken her work for granted.

Unbidden, an old adage popped into Norah's mind. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. But why would she want to find her way into Mason's heart? The goal she'd set for her life when she was a teenager couldn't be realized on a Sand Hills ranch. And although she'd known Mason only a few hours, she couldn't envision him in any other place except this setting.

Mason interrupted her thoughts when he said, "I'll take you to the Bar 8 ranch today so you can see where you'll be spending the summer. The program doesn't start for two weeks. You may not want to stay there all that time."

"How far away is the Bar 8 ranch?"

"About ten miles."

"Anyone live closer than that?"

"One of my employees and his wife live on the property as caretakers, three-quarters of a mile from the main house. I graze cattle and horses on the ranch, and we occasionally have rustlers, so I can't leave the property unprotected."

Norah had always lived in a city and didn't look forward to staying at the isolated Bar 8. But where else could she stay? There weren't any motels close by, and she certainly couldn't spend two weeks at the Flying K. This was one hurdle she hadn't considered in her hasty decision to accept the job.

"I'll look around the Bar 8 before I decide where to stay. I'll need to check out the kitchen facilities and start planning meals. The only time I've cooked for a large group has been on holidays. I'll need to plan well in advance, so I'll know what groceries to buy."

"Then you should drive your car to the Bar 8, in case you do want to move in today, and I'll follow in the truck. Otherwise, we could have gone on horseback. There's a nice trail between the two ranches, and I'd rather ride a horse than drive, but trucks are a lot faster."

Norah slanted her eyes toward him. She'd never ridden a horse, but she figured that was something she'd learn to do before the summer was over. Would she regret her hasty decision to take this job?

Pulling his chair up to the table again, Mason reached for the last biscuit. "I might as well eat this. It looks lonesome on that plate all by itself."

The two-story frame white house at the Bar 8 ranch gleamed in the morning sun. As they stood in the yard, Mason explained, “This place was a horse ranch for years, and the house was built sometime before World War I when ranching was profitable. But after the original owners died, a man from Colorado bought the property and developed it into a vacation ranch for city people.”

Norah followed Mason’s pointing hand as he said, “He turned the barn loft into dormitories and kept the ground floor as a meeting room and dance hall.”

“Will these children be able to use second-floor facilities?”

“No, but that motel-like building beside the barn has several rooms. The staff will use the barn loft for offices, the first floor as an inside riding arena, and the one-story building will be used to lodge the children and volunteers. Those other buildings are the stables and equipment sheds.”

He turned his attention to the house. “Let’s go inside so you can see where you’ll be working.”

A newly installed ramp made the house handicapped accessible. When the house was renovated for use as a dude ranch, partitions had been taken out of the original structure and the first floor contained a kitchen, a large dining area and rest rooms to the left of the dining room.

“The kitchen equipment is modern,” Norah commented as she looked around the large room.

“Yes, it’s in good shape. The upstairs rooms haven’t changed much since the house was built.”

“Hey, Mason,” a voice called from outside.

“That’s Doug. I’ll see what he wants.”

Mason opened the door. A young blond man, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, stood on the porch. “Doug, meet Norah Williamson. She’s the one I hired to take care of the cooking.” He turned to Norah and explained, “Doug Johnson and his wife, Sheila, are the caretakers here. Sheila will be helping you in the kitchen.”

“Glad to meet you, Norah,” Doug said, taking off his wide-brimmed hat. “Sheila’s been looking forward to your arrival.” Looking at Mason, he said, “Before you leave, I’d like for you to come to the stable. I brought in an injured calf—thought you’d better take a look at it.”

“I can check the rest of the house by myself, if you want to go now,” Norah said to Mason.

“All right. I’ll stop back soon and see what you’ve decided.”

The upstairs was divided into four bedrooms and two bathrooms. All the rooms were furnished comfortably with choices of queen or twin beds, and plenty of chairs and chests. Norah chose a room with a queen-size bed on the back side of the house for her personal quarters. She was downstairs giving the kitchen a closer inspection when Mason returned.

“This kitchen is supplied with anything a cook would need, but I want to wash all the utensils and dishes before the guests arrive. I’ll have plenty to keep me occupied for the next two weeks. We might as well move in my things, and then you can go back to your work.”

“You don’t have to clean the house. Sheila does it occasionally, but H & H has arranged for volunteers to do the cleaning. You’re not required to do anything except cook.”

“Still, I’ll have enough to keep me busy until the children arrive.”

“But I’ve gotten the feeling that you’re a little uneasy about living in the country. Will you be afraid to stay alone?”

“Probably, but I’ll get used to it. Don’t worry about me.”

Mason’s eyes still reflected his concern after the car was unpacked. “I’ll leave my cell phone with you until phone service can be started here.” He took a sale bill from his pocket and wrote Doug’s phone number as well as his own on it and handed the paper to Norah. “If you have any trouble at all, call me. Will you promise to do that?”

“All right, Mason, I promise.”

She stood on the porch and waved to him as he drove away. After spending her life caring for others, it was nice to have someone concerned about her. In less than twenty-four hours, Mason had brought a song to her heart—a song of thanksgiving to God for bringing this man into her life.

She watched until Mason reached the county road, where he made a quick U-turn and came back to the house. She went down the steps to meet him.

"Is something wrong?"

He pushed his hat far back on his forehead. "We're not thinking too well. There's no food here, unless you have groceries packed in your suitcases."

"I have some fruit and crackers in the car." Norah laughed and patted her stomach. "But it won't hurt me to fast for a few hours. If you'll give me directions to a grocery store, I'll go shopping tomorrow and lay in a supply of food to last me until our guests arrive."

Mason scratched his head, an unconscious mannerism he displayed when he was thinking. "I've got some work to finish today, but tomorrow I can take you into Valentine and show you where to shop."

"I don't want to inconvenience you. I'll find my way if you point me in the right direction." She added, in a joking manner, "That is, if I don't encounter Buster again."

"I told you that Buster is a lamb. Actually, I'm trying to think of a way to keep you at my house for a few days. After that breakfast you prepared, I want to see what you can do with a full meal."

"Then I'll settle in here today, come to your ranch, prepare supper, spend the night and tomorrow we'll go shopping. How's that?"

A wide smile spread over his face, and his whiskers seemed to bristle with pleasure.

"That's music to my ears. If I'm not at home when you arrive, go on in. The door's never locked. The freezer is full of meat."

Mason's gaze roved over the secluded valley that surrounded the Bar 8, and he reflected, "For the past four years I've often considered this ranch a pain in the neck." He looked pointedly at her, and his dark eyes were gentle and contemplative as he added, "Today it looks better to me than it ever has."

His words brought a glow of warmth to her face, and her heart sang with delight as he stepped into the pickup and drove away.

Chapter Three

Norah had just started checking out the kitchen appliances when a knock sounded on the door. A petite brunette entered at Norah's invitation.

"Hi," the newcomer said. "I'm Sheila Johnson, Doug's wife. I'll be your closest neighbor. Is there anything I can help you do today?"

"I hardly know what to do myself," Norah admitted. "Mason seems vague about the rehab program. Have you talked with any of the staff members about their planned schedule?"

"Yes, a little." Sheila shivered. "It's cold in here. We need more heat to take out the dampness. Come in the dining room, and I'll turn up the thermostat. I run the sweeper and dust once a month, but I haven't been here for three weeks."

Heat soon penetrated the house as Sheila and Norah sat on the sofa located at one end of the large dining room.

"The equine therapeutic program is called Horses and Healing," Sheila explained, "better known by H & H. Their activities start the first of June and will end by September. That's about all I've been told. I have the telephone number of the Omaha office if you want to talk with the director."

"I'll do that. I've never handled a job like this," Norah admitted, "and I'm a little anxious about it. I want to be well prepared before the first group arrives."

Sheila stood. "Let me know when I can help you. Will you come to our house for supper this evening?"

"Thanks, but I'm going back to Mason's tonight, and he'll take me into town tomorrow. I need to buy groceries for myself until the therapy sessions start." A smile touched Norah's shapely mouth. "He invited me to supper, but I have to prepare it. He mentioned meat, but I wonder what else he has to cook."

Sheila laughed. "Precious little! He keeps meat, potatoes and apples, but not much else. He'd starve to death if he had to depend on his own cooking. He goes to town several times a week, and he always stops in at a restaurant."

"He mentioned that you invite him to dinner often."

Sheila's eyes gleamed fondly. "Yes, we do. Doug's father and Mason have been friends for years. He's almost like one of the family."

"I'm sure he appreciates it."

"By the way, I keep a well-stocked pantry and freezer, because sometimes in the winter we're snowbound and I can't go to the store for a week or more. Come to our house for lunch, and you can choose some food from the freezer to supplement what you'll find at the Flying K."

"Thanks, I'll do that. It's not easy to step into a strange kitchen and prepare a meal, although I managed breakfast this morning."

After Sheila left, Norah took an inventory of the kitchen equipment and serving dishes, but she couldn't keep her mind on the work she'd be doing throughout the summer months. Instead, she kept anticipating another evening in Mason's company.

Soon after she returned from lunching with Doug and Sheila, she packed her overnight bag and headed toward the Flying K headquarters. Sheila had contributed some fresh vegetables and other staples to supplement the supplies she'd find in Mason's kitchen.

Barking loudly, the black Labs surrounded her car when she reached the Flying K. Their tails were wagging, and considering that a good sign, Norah got out of her car, let them sniff her hands, then scratched their backs before she went inside.

She didn't know when to expect Mason, but she figured he'd work until almost dark. She took a thick steak from the freezer, and while it thawed in the microwave, she checked out the rest of the supplies she'd need.

Three hours later, when she saw Mason, on horseback, hazing a small herd of calves toward the corral, she had the meal prepared. Swiss steak, curried rice, green beans, vegetable salad, hot rolls and custard pie should be the kind of meal he'd like. As hard as he worked, Mason would soon throw off the calories from that kind of meal, but Norah knew she'd have to eat small portions.

When had she suddenly become concerned about the extra ten or fifteen pounds she carried? Oh, just in the past twenty-four hours! Admiration of Mason's muscular body had prompted her to take a closer look at herself, making her wish she still weighed the same as she had twenty years ago.

All day long, Mason had looked forward to another evening with Norah. While he rounded up calves for branding, he kept remembering how well she'd fit into his environment. It hadn't seemed awkward to have a strange woman sitting at the table. He couldn't recall when he'd ever met a woman who put him more at ease. Living alone as he did, he'd talk for hours when he met one of his male acquaintances, but he never had much to say to women.

He'd used the excuse of a meal to persuade her to spend another night at the Flying K, although it wasn't the food, but Norah's company that he wanted.

After he'd thought about it, Mason figured Norah had hesitated to accept his invitation because she wasn't comfortable staying in the house with him. He supposed he should have thought of that. He knew she was safe with him, but she had no way of knowing what kind of man he was. He'd wondered all day if she would really come, but his heart beat a little faster, and he jiggled the reins for added speed, when he topped a small rise and saw her white car parked in front of his home.

Norah was standing on the porch, and she waved as he drove the calves into the corral. He hustled to finish his evening chores, so eager to see Norah that he didn't even think about food until he stepped up on the porch. It was such a change to smell food cooking when he approached the house that he halted abruptly. What had he missed all of these years by not having a wife waiting for him at the end of his day's work?

Norah smiled easily, and Mason's smile, gleaming from his bewhiskered face, matched hers in contentment when she appeared at the door, dressed in a red blouse and tan pants.

"Good evening, Mason. You work late."

Mason had never experienced such a pleasurable homecoming. If she'd been his wife, he could have taken her in his arms and kissed her, but he only said, "There's always a lot of work on a ranch in the spring. I usually have a man or two working with me, but no one could help today. Smells like you've got a fine supper waiting. I haven't eaten since morning, so I hope you fixed plenty."

"I don't think you'll go away from the table hungry."

And he didn't. When the meal was finished, dishes put away, they sat down to relax. He'd forgotten how much pleasure a wife could bring to a home. He'd only lived one year with his wife, and that had been a long time ago. Besides, she'd been ill most of that time carrying their child, and they hadn't had much opportunity to enjoy each other's company.

Just two days of Norah's presence, and he'd started thinking of marriage again. He'd told himself, over and over, during the past twenty-four hours that his thoughts were ridiculous. He knew they were, but he could see no reason not to enjoy Norah's company to the fullest when he could.

Wanting to learn all he could about her, Mason asked, "What about your family, Norah? Your childhood?"

Norah's dark eyebrows curved mischievously. "You've already hired me. It's a little late for a background check."

He countered her lighthearted mood by saying, "After that feast tonight, regardless of your credentials, you won't get fired. I'll kidnap you if I have to, just to have you cook for me."

"But when Horses and Healing starts operating, I'll be cooking for them," she responded. An eyebrow tilted provocatively, and her lips trembled slightly in amusement.

"Surely you won't turn me away if I come around for an occasional handout."

"We'll see," she said, her azure eyes sparkling with silent laughter. "But about my childhood," she continued, seriously, "it's been so long ago that I can hardly remember. Actually, I had a fine childhood but my mother was killed in an automobile accident when I was almost eighteen. I grew up mighty fast after that."

"My mother died when I was two. I can't even remember her."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"My dad made up for it, though. He didn't marry again and devoted his time to me. But go ahead with your story."

"There were five of us. I was ten years older than the other children, so Dad asked me to take over managing the house after Mother's death. I didn't hesitate to do that, although it was a great disappointment when I couldn't go to college as I'd planned."

"What was wrong with your disabled brother?"

"Billy had cerebral palsy, and I cared for him as my mother would have done." Her lips quivered as she added, "He died six months ago, a month before my father. My other brother and two sisters were away from home by that time. The work I'd spent over half of my life doing was suddenly taken away, and I was at loose ends. I admit that I'd chafed at my lifestyle—often thinking I was in bondage. But when I had my freedom, I didn't know what to do with it."

Norah paused, and her thoughts filtered back to the time when her whole life seemed to collapse around her. "While I was casting around for some direction, I came across your e-mail advertisement. Coming to do this work seemed like an opportunity to get away from familiar surroundings for a few months and find a new perspective on what I can do with the rest of my life."

"What do you want to do?"

"Become a missionary," she said simply. "That's all I've ever wanted to do. I was fifteen when I experienced God's call to go overseas as a missionary. By the time I graduated from high school, I'd been accepted at a Christian college. My training would have started a month after my mother was killed."

"Are you going on with that training now?" Mason asked, with some disappointment. His dreams of a future with Norah had been nipped in the bud before they'd hardly materialized in his own mind.

"I don't know. I'm kind of apprehensive about starting college at my age. I'd be almost fifty before I could get the necessary education and training. And I'm not sure I could receive an appointment at that age."

"It seems a bit selfish of your father to ask you to give up the career you'd planned."

"I've never blamed him. He couldn't care for Billy by himself, and none of us wanted to put Billy in an institution, so I was happy to do it. But I fully expected, when my siblings became older, that they would assume some of the responsibilities and free me to go to college, but none of them even considered it."

"Did you ask them?"

"Yes, of course, and they'd give me half promises, then pursue their own lives as if they had no obligation to their family. I'd been a mother to them, and I'm ashamed to admit that I find it hard to forgive them for being so insensitive to my needs."

"It does seem as if they could have helped."

Norah leaned back and closed her eyes. "You would think so, but they didn't. In fact, they compounded my problem by using me as a baby-sitter. They knew I'd always be at home, so they brought their children to me for an afternoon, a day, sometimes as long as a week while they went on vacation. It didn't seem to occur to them that I might like a break. My father took over so I could attend church services, but I didn't even do that after Billy's health worsened."

"Sounds like your siblings are selfish."

She opened her eyes and nodded. “Yes, they are. And they’re so mad at me now that they won’t speak to me. My father willed the family home to me, and they didn’t mind at all because they thought the situation would continue as always. But I put the house up for sale several weeks ago. I might use the money from selling the house to go to college, but that depends on whether I’m too old to still realize my dream.”

Mason slanted a speculative glance in her direction. “So that’s why they’re mad at you!”

“Yes. Their free baby-sitter is gone.” She paused, thinking of the quarrel she’d had with her family. “The things they said to me hurt deeply—words that I find hard to forgive.”

“Sounds to me like you’ve done enough for them.”

“I suppose so, but I keep remembering that Jesus taught His followers to be servants. He said once, ‘Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ And the Apostle Paul made a strong point when he said, ‘Serve one another in love.’ So I’m probably a disobedient Christian by resenting the years I spent serving my family.”

“I assume your siblings are Christians, too. Looks like serving ought to work both ways,” Mason argued in her defense.

“I’ve tried to justify my attitude, using the same line of reasoning, but my conscience makes me wonder if the mission field God had in mind for me was serving in my own home. I did my duty by taking care of Dad and my brother, but maybe I was doing it for the wrong reasons.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute,” Mason said. “I’ve only known you for a short time, but I’m convinced you’re a loving, compassionate woman.”

“Thanks, Mason. I’d like to believe that, but when I take an introspective look at myself, I don’t like what I see. I pray that this summer’s work will give me a new perspective on what God wants me to do. With all my heart, I want to accept His will for my life.”

Mason watched the play of emotions on Norah’s face, and as she sat with eyes downcast, he wanted to put a comforting hand on her shoulder. But now wasn’t the time. Nor would it be appropriate to tell Norah that the longer he was around her, the more he liked what he saw.

Chapter Four

The two dogs jumped on Mason as he and Norah exited the door the next morning. He wrestled playfully with them for a few minutes.

"Okay, you guys are in charge," he said. "We'll be gone most of the day. I'm taking Norah on a tour of the county."

He opened the truck door for Norah. There wasn't a running board, which meant she had to manage a step of almost two feet to get into the vehicle. Mason pushed back his hat and scratched his head, a habitual gesture of his.

"Well, now!" he said. "I swing into the truck seat like I mount a horse. That is a big step for a lady."

Without a word, he put his arms around Norah's waist and effortlessly placed her on the seat. She sensed the warmth of his large hands through her shirt.

"If I'm going to ride in your truck, you'll have to bring a ladder along for me," she said, when he swung into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Grinning provocatively, he said lazily, "Oh, I don't know. I kinda liked the way we did it this morning."

Flustered, Norah looked out the window and waved a hand at the dogs, who were standing downhearted, tails between their legs, watching them leave.

"The dogs like to ride in the truck, but not when I leave the ranch."

"What're their names?"

"Pete and Repeat."

"What!"

"I got them when they were pups. They're from the same litter and almost identical, so I thought those were good names. They're good hunters. We have lots of water fowl in this area."

Mason threaded his fingers through his bushy beard. "I don'tknow if I can stand these whiskers for six more weeks. They're about to drive me crazy."

"Then you don't usually wear whiskers?"

"Never have before! Ranchers in this end of the county gather on the Fourth of July for horse racing, fireworks, music, ox roast—that sort of thing. We try to revive the Old West for a day. We give prizes for the most authentic costumes, and for riding contests. But last year, somebody came up with the crazy idea of having a beard-growing contest to see who could grow the most outstanding beard from New Year's Day to the Fourth of July. I didn't mind it so much when the weather was cold, but whiskers are too hot for summer. I'm tempted to shave now and be done with it."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Norah said as the truck whizzed past the spot where she'd had the encounter with Buster.

"Do you like my whiskers?" he asked, a quizzical expression in his eyes.

A flash of humor spread across her face. "Not particularly, but you've put up with them this long, you shouldn't give up now. They might not be so bad if you'd trim them."

"I might as well shave completely as trim the beard. We're judged on who has the longest and thickest whiskers."

"Then, by all means, don't trim them. I believe in finishing what you start. Since you've had the whiskers for almost five months, you might as well keep them on until after the contest."

They met a few other pickups as they traveled northward toward Valentine, and Norah noticed that all the male drivers had beards.

"Where do you have the celebration?"

"Each rancher takes turns hosting the event, and it'll be at the Flying K this summer. A committee plans the day's activities, so all I have to do is supply the place and the meat. I'll provide a steer."

"Sounds like fun."

"You're invited to come. Ranchers' clothes haven't changed much in the last hundred years, but the women wear vintage outfits. I think you can rent costumes in Valentine."

"I'd like to be there, but it will depend on my duties for Horses and Healing."

"I don't believe they're in session during the holiday week," he said. "I'd like for you to be my hostess for the occasion."

"What does a hostess have to do?"

"Welcome people to the party by serving coffee or soft drinks when they arrive. Mostly, just see that everyone has a good time. Since I live alone, my guests have always fended for themselves when they came to the Flying K."

"I'll consider it. How many attend?"

"Fifty to seventy-five. We aren't heavily populated in this part of the state."

Mason had attended all of the celebrations. The miles passed quickly as he entertained Norah with amusing anecdotes of past years.

When they entered the outskirts of Valentine, Mason said, "The town is known as Nebraska's Heart City. People from all over the world send valentines to be stamped and mailed from here. But it's a thriving town, too, serving the ranchers in this vicinity."

They went first to a garage where Norah made arrangements for repair to be made on her car the next week. Then Mason drove around the business section, pointing out the post office, several grocery stores and restaurants. They stopped at a bank so Norah could open an account, which would be more convenient than to draw on her bank in Missouri during the summer. When they left the bank, Mason checked his watch.

"It's eleven o'clock," he said. "Since the weather is nice today, how about having a picnic?"

"Sounds great to me."

"Let's buy food and go to the picnic area at the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge east of town."

He drove to a grocery store that had a deli, and when they went inside, Mason said, "You order —I'll pay. I like any food, so buy what you want."

Norah ordered a large and a small sub sandwich with cheese and turkey, two containers of vegetable salad and slices of chocolate cake. She chose frosted fruit drinks, as well as a cup of coffee for Mason.

"We'll stop back here before we leave town so you can buy the groceries you need."

The thought of her move to the Bar 8 ranch depressed him. The more he was around Norah, the more she fascinated him. He wanted her to stay at the Flying K until the children arrived, but he knew he shouldn't suggest it.

He could think of numerous reasons why he shouldn't become emotionally involved with Norah, so he was only laying up heartache for himself by becoming fond of her. A little voice inside kept repeating, Even if it's only for a short time, you might as well enjoy her. Still, always in the back of his mind was the tickling certainty of how lonely he'd be when she left Nebraska at the end of the summer.

Mason related the background of the area as they drove the short distance to the refuge, and Norah learned that great herds of buffalo had roamed the grasslands before white settlers came to the region. The Range Indians had depended on the buffalo for their livelihood, following the great herds as they migrated from north to south for summer and winter grazing. As the United States frontier expanded westward, Fort Niobrara had been built in 1879 to discourage conflict between the natives and the settlers.

"During the twenty-some years of the fort's existence, the soldiers weren't involved in any fighting," Mason said. "And a few years after the fort was dismantled in 1912, the area became a wildlife refuge."

As Mason continued to discuss the history of the land, Norah considered what a difference a few days in Mason's company had made. Even in her thoughts, she didn't like to keep harping on how her family had imposed upon her, but for over twenty years she'd been almost like a prisoner of her family. When she did leave the house, she was always in a hurry to get home, knowing she was needed. She'd had a few boyfriends in her teen years, and they'd gone to movies and eaten in the local restaurants, but she hadn't dated at all after her mother died. And she'd hardly set foot out of Springfield during all those years.

Travel commentaries hadn't prepared her for the beauty of America. She looked in awe at the rolling Sand Hills and the breaks along the Niobrara River. Wild turkeys scratched in the grasslands along the river, where aspen and burr oak trees grew, side by side with Ponderosa pines. Near the Visitor's Center, prairie dogs lived in an underground town, and several peered out of holes and barked. Mason lowered the windows so they could listen to meadowlarks, perched on fence posts, serenading them as they drove by.

"Why are there so few trees?" Norah asked.

"The soil is sandy, there's not much rainfall and strong winds through the centuries have discouraged tree growth."

A large herd of buffalo, almost every cow with a brownish-colored calf by her side, grazed contentedly in the high grass along the river. As they traveled slowly along the wildlife drive, Norah made constant use of Mason's binoculars, which he always kept in the glove compartment, sighting elk, and Texas longhorn cattle, also with calves by their sides.

"The refuge is devoted primarily to the management of buffalo, elk and Texas longhorns," Mason explained. "Although millions of buffalo once roamed the grasslands, the animals had dwindled to less than a thousand in the United States until these programs started. The wildlife are kept at manageable numbers—four hundred buffalo, sixty elk and about three hundred longhorns—here in this refuge. Other areas in the country have similar programs."

"It's great to see our nation's tax dollars put to such a good use. A lot of the nation's history would have disappeared without programs like this."

"Several hiking trails lead into the wilder areas of the refuge, but we won't have time to hike today," Mason said as he parked the truck and they got out. "Let's eat, buy your groceries and head home."

They placed the deli containers on a picnic table, but with the wind blowing at hurricane force, it was a constant battle to prevent the sandwich wrappers from blowing away.

With a wry grimace, Mason said, "Not too good a day for a picnic, but the wind always blows up here."

Holding a juice carton in her left hand, and a sub in the other, Norah couldn't do anything about her hair that was standing straight up. A particularly strong gust lifted Mason's hat from his head and pitched it several yards away. He hurriedly retrieved the hat and threw it into the truck, allowing his long hair to blow around his face.

A lot of women would be having a fit about having to eat under such conditions, Mason thought, but Norah downed her food without complaint. He looked her over approvingly, caressing her with his dark eyes.

Norah intercepted his gaze, and her face flushed. Why couldn't she get over acting like a lovesick youth when she was with this man? It was disturbing to blush every time he favored her with a glance.

Noting her heightened color, Mason said, “I shouldn’t have been staring. It’s so unusual for me to be out having a good time in the middle of a workday, that I keep wondering if it’s really happening or if I’m dreaming.”

“It’s sort of like a dream for me, too. We have excellent scenery in Missouri, but I haven’t seen much of it. I’m a vicarious traveler. I’ve read a lot of books on our national parks and I watch travelogues on TV, but it seems different when you’re actually on the site. This has been a rare treat for me today. So, thanks, Mason.”

“Didn’t you get away from home at all?”

“Not for overnight. Most of my expeditions were concerned with shopping, doctors’ appointments and the like. The years passed before I knew it.”

“Ranchers can’t take extended vacations, so I haven’t done much traveling, either. But I’ve hunted in Wyoming and Colorado, and I know the Dakotas and Nebraska pretty well.”

“Don’t think I’m complaining about my years at home. I was willing to do it. But that’s all I’ve done, so I don’t have much of interest to talk about.”

“Talk about anything that pops into your head,” Mason said. “I enjoy the sound of your voice.”

Not wanting a repeat performance of being lifted bodily into the truck, Norah had learned to stand on tiptoe, hold the door handle and spring into the truck cab, while Mason stood by if she needed help. She was sure she didn’t look very graceful, but at least she had managed the two times she’d boarded the truck in Valentine. But this time, she fell backward against Mason. He wrapped his arms around her midriff, and for a moment, she relaxed against him, enjoying the feel of his arms around her. Her breath was uneven, but she said, shakily, “Perhaps you’d better give me a boost.”

He loosened his grip lightly and lifted her into the cab. Refusing to meet his gaze, Norah took a comb from her purse and arranged her hair in its usual style. Mason shook his head to settle his hair in place before he put on his hat.

“My hair is as hard to control as my beard,” he said. “I’ve been letting it grow along with my whiskers. I think I’ll dress as a mountain man for this year’s celebration, if I can find a buckskin outfit to fit me.”

When he pulled into the parking lot in front of a grocery store, he said, “This is where Sheila does all of her buying, so I guess it’s a good place. I keep a cooler in the back of the truck during the summer months, so you can take perishables back with you. While you shop, I’ll buy a sack of ice and dump it in the cooler.”

“I won’t buy much,” Norah said as she went into the store. “Just enough to tide me over until I have the job outline for the summer.”

Mason stopped at the Flying K long enough for Norah to pick up her car, and then he continued to the Bar 8 ranch with her.

“You don’t need to go,” Norah insisted. “I can find my way all right.”

“I want to check and see if the telephone is working,” Mason insisted.

He knew it wasn’t necessary for him to go with her, but he still had the impression that she didn’t want to stay at the Bar 8 ranch. For the last hour of their return drive from Valentine, Norah had hardly talked at all, nor did she pay much attention to the scenery, although she’d been vibrant and enthusiastic earlier in the day. Perhaps she was only tired, but he sensed there was more to it than that.

Mason was impelled to see Norah settled safely for the night. He went into the house with her, checked the phone and found that it still wasn’t in service.

“You have my cell phone, so you can telephone if you need to,” he said. She looked rather forlorn standing in the middle of the big dining room, and he said, “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m ashamed to admit this, but I know it’s going to get dark soon, and I’m afraid. I’ve always lived in the city, where it never gets dark. Just telling you about it makes me realize how foolish I sound. I’m determined to stay here. I will be all right,” she said as if she was trying to convince herself.

"There's a security light in the yard. It won't be completely dark, and you can leave lights on in the house. But you're welcome to stay at the Flying K until you adjust to being in the country."

Forcing a smile, Norah said, "You have work to do, so go back to the ranch and don't worry about me. I agreed to do this job, and I'm going to stay here alone tonight if it kills me. If I ever go to work on the mission field, I'll probably spend many nights alone."

Mason was becoming fond of Norah, perhaps too fond for his own good. It troubled him every time she mentioned her desire to become a missionary, because it seemed to drive an insurmountable wedge between them. Such a decision should be kept between Norah and God, and he was determined that he wouldn't interfere. Better to keep his emotions and thoughts to himself until Norah came to terms with her future.

"You'll be safe enough, and I can be here in a short time if you need me."

"You hired me to be a cook. It isn't your responsibility to be my guardian." She placed her hand on his shoulder, intending to lead him toward the door. She might as well have tried to move Mount Rushmore. He didn't budge until he was ready.

"Keep the cell phone handy, and let me know if you're uneasy." He looked at her keenly, a sense of wonderment in his eyes. "I've had a great day."

"So did I, Mason. It's a day I'll never forget."

Chapter Five

The Bar 8 ranch house seemed as quiet as a tomb after Mason left, but with dogged determination, Norah stored her groceries in the cabinets and refrigerators and made a Caesar salad. The large dining room intimidated her, and she sat on a stool at the long work island in the center of the kitchen to eat her meal. Instead of thinking about the silence around her, she forced herself to concentrate on the day she'd spent with Mason.

She'd enjoyed the beautiful scenery, so different from her Missouri countryside, but more than that, it had been pleasant to be in Mason's company. Until today, she hadn't realized how satisfying male company could be. Mason was a good companion, and for a moment, she contemplated what it would be like to spend the rest of her life with someone like him. At that point, she stopped her speculation. When she was younger, Norah had looked forward to marriage, but always with a man who shared her interest in overseas missions. Mason King wasn't that man, and she had to discourage any flights of fancy about lifelong companionship with him.

Norah washed the few dishes by hand rather than use the large dishwasher. She locked every door and window on the first floor and turned out all the lights except the one on the front porch. She dropped Mason's cell phone in her pocket and went upstairs to settle in, closing all the draperies on the second floor.

The four bedrooms were equal in size, so Norah had chosen the one with a view of the rangeland. The rooms were sparsely furnished. To make the room more like her crowded bedroom at home, she moved a platform rocker and footstool in from another room.

Mason had hooked up her television on a low table, and she angled the screen so she could watch from the bed or from the rocker. She laid her Bible on the bedside table and placed her crochet bag by the chair. For years, Norah had been making scarves and mittens for unfortunate children in the United States and overseas. Her current project was crocheting cardigans for newborns of low-income single mothers.

Tonight Norah wasn't in the mood for crocheting or television, and she picked up the Bible. Soon she would have to search for Scriptural guidance to deal with her conflicting emotions about Mason, but tonight she had to come to grips with her fear of darkness.

It wasn't difficult to figure out what had caused her fears. Her own mother had been afraid of darkness due to a frightening childhood experience. It had never been completely dark in the Williamson household, because streetlights were numerous. On the occasions when a power outage occurred, her mother had chased away the darkness with candles and lamplight. Norah's siblings had mastered their phobias when they left home for college, and Norah was determined that she would, too.

The Bible was Norah's guide for all situations, and she checked out references to darkness. She didn't want to talk to herself, but reading Scripture out loud would be an antidote to her fear, so she read in a strong voice, "'You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.'" The sound of her voice did make the silence more bearable.

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