

CHAPTER 1



NEBRASKA, 1890

“*Y*ou're awfully quiet this evening, Lizzie. You've hardly spoken during supper. Anything wrong?”
“No, Papa. I guess I'm a bit tired, but that's all.”

“Daughter, I'd appreciate it if you'd look at me when you're speaking to me. I can always tell when you're hiding something if I can see your eyes.” He waited until her head rose and she was looking at him, and then smiled before going on. “Thank you. Now, you're sure you're not feeling poorly?”

“I'm fine, Papa, honest. Like I said, I'm just a little tired.”

He narrowed his eyes, not particularly believing her entirely, but satisfied for the time being. He'd watch her the next couple of days and see if he could pick up on any clues that might help him determine what was on her mind. “Maybe if you're finished eating you should call it an early evening and go upstairs a little early tonight.”

“I think I will, as soon as I help Ella with the dishes,” Lizzie responded, standing and gathering dishes from the table.

"I'll help Ella tonight, my dear. You can go on upstairs if you want. You look a bit peaked to me. If you say you're just tired, that might be it, but I'd feel better if you'd get a good night's sleep. If you're not yourself in the morning, we'll see if we need to call Doc Avery."

"Papa, you don't need to call the doctor. I'm fine, just a little tired. I can help Ella, though. Then I'll go upstairs."

"I'm perfectly capable of drying dishes," Benjamin Morgan said with a bit of a huff. "I helped your mother nearly every night years ago, when you were just a baby. Besides, I have something I'd like to talk to her about, and I found out years ago that she's much more likely to talk while she's working."

Lizzie looked over at her father with a look of concern. "What do you want to talk to Ella about?"

"Nothing you need to be concerned about, my dear." When he saw the concern on her face intensify, he relented. "Okay, okay, I'll tell you. It really isn't anything you need to be concerned about, but I can see by your face you won't be satisfied until I tell you. I got a letter today from my brother, Ralph. He and his wife and their daughter are going to come for a visit. I want to talk to Ella to see if she would get a couple of extra rooms ready for them."

Lizzie's eyes lit up. "Oh, how wonderful. I haven't seen Aunt Jane or Cousin Eloise in years. When are they going to get here? Will they be able to stay long?"

Ben was happy to see Lizzie smiling and excited again. Lately she'd seemed rather subdued, which was why he was concerned. Maybe a nice visit would bring her back around. "They'll be here Tuesday of next week. I'm not real sure how long they'll be staying."

"I hope they can stay more than just a few days. I'd love to be able to show Eloise around the ranch. It would be a good way for us to get to know each other again."

Ben's foreman, Coy Clemson, took his meals with Ben and Lizzie. The first part of the meal usually included conversation

between Ben and Coy relating to the ranch. Coy had been listening to Ben's news of the upcoming visit, and smiled at Lizzie's excitement. "Is your cousin about the same age as you?" he asked.

Lizzie momentarily froze and her face paled. Ben noticed her reaction to his question, and watched the two of them closely. She turned to face Coy and Ben could tell she was choosing her words carefully. "Yes, Eloise is about the same age as me, and we get along very well. We'll more than likely be together everywhere we go while she's visiting."

Coy caught her eyes momentarily, but Ben couldn't quite make out the meaning behind the look on his face. He would have to ask Lizzie about it sometime when they were alone. He had no idea why, but his daughter had never cared much for his foreman. It seemed no matter how hard Coy tried to befriend her, she wanted nothing to do with him. It bothered Ben, since they were both important people to him, but he never could figure out why Lizzie seemed opposed to any sort of friendship between them.

Maybe he needed to have a talk with her and ask her directly. He'd asked her general questions about all the hands he had working for him, and although she'd never mentioned a specific complaint about Coy, it was quite obvious to him there was something about him she didn't care for. He'd hoped if he gave her a little more time to get to know him she'd come around, but if anything, she seemed to be trying to avoid him more. It was about time he found out what it was she had against him.

Ben was true to his word, and encouraged Lizzie to go on upstairs to her room. He knew she enjoyed reading before retiring for the night, and suggested she might want to do that this evening. She thanked her father and stood. She turned to head for the stairs, when Coy said, "Sleep well, Miss Lizzie."

She stopped, but didn't turn back around to look at him. Instead, she simply said, "I hope to," and went up the stairs.

Ben questioned the strained relationship between her and Coy

again, but didn't say anything. He took a handful of dishes into the kitchen once he watched her climbing the stairs. Coy took his cue and gathered his own dishes and took them to the kitchen, as well, before taking his hat off the hat pegs by the door and leaving for the evening, to return to the foreman's cabin.

Ella seemed surprised to see Ben carrying dirty dishes, and tried to take them from his hands. "Is something wrong with Lizzie this evening?" she asked out of genuine concern. Ben knew Ella loved Lizzie like her own daughter, and in a way, she was. Claudine, Lizzie's mother, died during an outbreak of influenza when their daughter was only six. Ben had done his best to raise the little girl from then on, but he would be the first to admit he wouldn't have been able to do it without all the help he had gotten from Ella.

When Claudine first got sick he and the wife of one of his ranch hands tried running the house and taking care of little Lizzie, while trying to nurse Claudine back to health. When it became apparent she wasn't getting better and may be fighting this illness for some time, he hired Ella. She had recently lost her husband and needed a place to stay and a way to support herself, but she was also exactly what Ben needed. She had been a godsend, both at the time and since his wife's death. She helped care for Claudine while she was bedridden, and took over the household chores. When Claudine succumbed to the illness several months later, Ella agreed to stay on. She had been like a mother to Lizzie, teaching her all the things a mother would normally teach her daughter. Ben would always be grateful to her for that.

"She said she's tired this evening, so I told her to go on upstairs to rest. I told her I'll help you with the dishes tonight."

"You don't have to do that, Ben. You've worked hard all day. I'm perfectly capable of cleaning up the kitchen myself. I've told Lizzie that numerous times, but she's such a sweet girl, she always insists on helping."

"Thank you for the kind words about my daughter, Ella. I

appreciate hearing things like that, but I want to help you tonight. There's something I'd like to talk to you about, and I thought maybe we could do that while we get the dishes washed up."

"You don't have to help me with the dishes for us to be able to talk, but if you insist, let me grab the rest of the dishes from the other room, then I'll wash and you can dry."

He chuckled as he followed her into the dining room. They came out moments later with the rest of the dishes. He told her about his expected guests as they washed and cleaned up the kitchen. She asked about any favorite dishes they might have, or any type of food they might not like, and assured Ben the guest rooms would be clean and aired out by Tuesday.

With that subject sufficiently addressed, Ella changed topics. "I've been a little concerned about Lizzie lately. She doesn't quite seem to be herself. It seems like something may be on her mind. Have you noticed anything?"

"Yes, I have, and I've been concerned, too. I was hoping you'd have some insight into what may be troubling her."

"I haven't been able to think of a thing. I've tried to talk to her about it, but she insists she's fine."

"She tells me the same thing," Ben said. "Maybe I'll try one more time to talk to her, and as I always say, there's no time like the present."

He turned to leave, but Ella stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Ben, your baby is a grown woman now. You may not have noticed it yet, but she's become a very pretty young lady. What used to be cute brown hair is now a beautiful chestnut color with streaks of lighter brown, almost a dark blond through it, and those streaks highlight her bright sapphire eyes that sparkle. That's why the young men at church are paying so much attention to her and talking to her after services. She's become a young woman on the inside, as well. Before you barge into her room, knock and ask if she's still dressed. If she has her nightgown on, your talk can wait

until morning. A young lady her age needs some privacy, even from her father.”

Ben felt his face blush, but nodded after a rather lengthy pause. “Thank you, Ella. You're right; as much as I still think of her as my little girl, she is a grown woman. I would have knocked, then gone on in, and that would have been wrong.”

“I wish you luck with your talk, but if she's not ready to talk yet, don't try to force her. She may have something she's still trying to sort out in her head. Give her time to do that before trying to make her talk to you. She's eighteen now, and I'm sure she's starting to see some things differently. That can be confusing. There are some things and feelings she may have that she needs to sort out for herself. It's fine to remind her that you and I are both willing to talk anytime she wants to, but don't force her to until she's ready.”

“Ella, I don't know what I'd do – no, what Lizzie and I would do without you. I'm looking at this through only my eyes as her father, and I want to help her with anything she needs help with. Once again, though, I think you're right, much like when you talked to me about my reaction when the Robinson boy asked to court her. You were right; I can tell her the young men I feel she should stay clear of, but I can see now that it would be a lot better if she came to that conclusion on her own.”

“As her father, you should keep a watchful eye on her and the young men she talks with after church and make sure she's safe. But it is better if she decides for herself the ones that are more interested in your money than in her.” After a few moments she asked, “Do you think that's what this is about; a boy?”

“I honestly don't know. Hopefully I'll find out soon, though.”

“Good luck. Let me know if I can do anything to help,” she said as he was headed for the stairs.

Ben stood outside her bedroom door for a couple of minutes, collecting his thoughts, before knocking. “Lizzie, are you still dressed?”

She opened the door moments later, fully clothed, and holding a book. "What is it, Papa?"

"May I come in for a moment so we can talk?"

"Yes, of course," she said, stepping aside so he could enter. He sat down on the bed and she sat down next to him. "Is something wrong?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you," he said. "I just talked to Ella, and she's been concerned about you. You said you're tired, but not ill. Is something on your mind?"

"I'm fine, Papa," she tried to assure him.

"Honey, if there's something bothering you, I hope you know you can talk to me or Ella. We both love you and will listen and try to help you with whatever has you bothered."

She started to assure him again that she was fine, but when she saw the concern in his eyes, she stopped. "You're right, Papa, there is something bothering me, but I'm not sure you want to hear what it is."

"Nonsense, daughter. Of course I want to know what it is so I can try to fix it for you. What has you so upset?"

"Please don't be upset with me, but it's Coy. I simply don't like him."

"Coy?" Ben's shock was evident. "What don't you like about Coy, and why does it have you so upset? If you don't especially like him, you don't have to spend much time around him." He stopped then, and picked up her hand. "Except that you do, at meals. Is that what the problem is? I know you've been awfully quiet at meals the last few days. Does he bother you that much, that you aren't able to enjoy your meals with him at the table?"

"I don't want to be around him at all, Papa. I know you two discuss ranch business over meals, and it wouldn't be fair for me to ask you to stop, but that's why I haven't been very talkative. Would you mind terribly if I took my supper with Ella, at least once in a while?"

"Nonsense," Ben said quickly. "You're my daughter, and if

anyone leaves the table it will be Coy. But let me just say, you're usually very good dealing with people. I've never seen you quick to judge people, and even if you don't care for someone, you generally hide that fact well. May I ask what Coy has done that has you so upset you're not able to enjoy our meals with him at the table?"

"Papa, I don't like the way he looks at me. He's always trying to get me alone with him, and I don't trust him."

Ben's eyes were instantly as big as saucers. "Surely, Lizzie, you're not suggesting you think he would take advantage of you?"

Lizzie dropped her head, but Ben watched as she soon squared her shoulders and willed herself to lift her head and look at him again. "I'm sorry, Papa, but that is what I'm saying. You've never seen the looks he gives me when you're not there with me."

Ben sighed and thought a few moments before responding. Finally, he took her hands in his. "Lizzie, I'm not sure if this is the right thing to do, but I feel I need to explain something to you. Coy came to me a couple of weeks ago and asked for permission to court you. We talked for several minutes, and I can tell he's very smitten."

Lizzie looked horrified. "You didn't tell him he could, did you?"

"No, I haven't," Ben said, surprised at how upset his daughter was at that news. "I told him I need time to consider his request. There are a few things I felt I needed to consider. First, he is my foreman. Is he truly interested in you, or does he see this as a path to this ranch some day? Also, one of the hands asked me last year for permission to court you and I turned him down."

"Really? Who, and why did you turn him down?"

"I'm not sure if you remember him. He left shortly after I said no. His name was Harold Buckner."

Lizzie thought several moments. "Wasn't he that old man?"

Ben had to chuckle. "That old man was forty, and although that's not an old man, it's too old for a seventeen-year-old. But the point is, a few of the hands know I turned him down, and he told them it was because he works for me. That's not why I turned him

down, but I never corrected him, thinking it might be better to let the men believe that. There have been a few men working for me that, although they seemed okay when I met them, after they worked for me a while I wouldn't have allowed them to court you. I thought it was probably easier to let them all think I wouldn't give any of them permission. If one of them was interested enough in you and they were a good man, they'd come to me and ask, even if they thought I'd say no."

Lizzie smiled at her papa, seeing again how much he cared about her. Then her mind wandered back to the reason for their talk. "Please don't say yes to Coy. I really don't like being around him."

"Honey, I won't say yes if it bothers you this much." She breathed out a long sigh and smiled, until her father went on. "At least not yet. I would like you to give Coy a chance, though. You said you don't like the way he looks at you, but I think he's looking at you the way he is because he cares for you. You're young, and living on this ranch, you haven't had an opportunity to be around too many young men."

"I've met several at church, besides the ones I went to school with."

"Yes, but you haven't gotten to know any of them well, either. Coy's a good worker, and he's given me no reason to be concerned about him as a man. Now that you know why he's looking at you the way he is, would you please give him a chance? I'm not asking you to have dinner with him in town or anything like that. I know you don't feel comfortable enough with him right now for that. What I am asking is that you not judge him, but keep an open mind about him and give him a fair chance. Talk to him a bit at meals, answer questions he asks with more than a quick yes or no, and allow yourself to get to know him while I'm here, as well. Then if you still don't like him, I'll understand. Could you do that much for me, please; just give him a chance?"

Lizzie was torn. Something about Coy made her uneasy

anytime she was around him, but her papa didn't ask much of her, so when he did, she hated to turn him down. She slowly nodded. "I guess I can do that much for you."

"Thank you, honey. Even if you decide you don't want him to court you, I'll understand. It would be nice, though, if you two could at least become friendly enough that we could continue to share meals since he is my foreman."

She forced a small smile. "I'll try to be nicer and give him an honest chance."



THE NEXT MORNING Lizzie was downstairs early, helping Ella with breakfast. "What are your plans for today, Lizzie? Are you going to work with the colts again?"

"No, I don't think so," she answered a bit slowly. Ella noticed her shoulders slumped a bit, as well.

"Do you have something else in mind?"

"Not really. I might just stay inside today. Do you need help with anything?"

Ella stopped cutting out biscuits and turned to face the younger lady. "Lizzie, you know I always enjoy your help and company, but what's wrong? I know how much you enjoy working with the horses, so why aren't you going out there with them?"

"Maybe I need something different today."

"Or someone different?"

Lizzie whirled around to stare at Ella, eyes wide open. "Why would you say that?"

The older lady, who had been like a mother to Lizzie, laid her hand gently on her arm. "Your father told me you're not as impressed with Coy as he seems to be. Does he have something to do with your decision to stay inside today?"

Ella watched as Lizzie raised her head high and started to say

something. When Ella caught her eyes, however, her shoulders slumped again. "Yes."

"Honey, talk to me about Coy. This isn't like you. I can't think of anyone else you've felt this strongly about. This isn't just a personality clash, is it? Why don't you want to be around him?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's a reason you're so skittish toward him." She moved closer and lowered her voice. "Did something happen your father or I should know about?"

There was a long moment of silence, during which Ella was growing very concerned. Finally, Lizzie shook her head. "No, not really." She looked up at her second mother with a helpless, scared look in her eyes. "I don't like the way he looks at me at all. He scares me. He's always trying to get me alone with him."

"Did you tell your father this?"

"I did, but he said he thinks it's because Coy asked him a couple of weeks ago if he could court me. Papa thinks he likes me, and I just haven't been around enough young men to know that that's how they look at you when they have feelings for you."

Ella thought a few moments. "Do you think he could be right?"

Lizzie slowly shook her head. "Not really. There were a couple of boys that I'm pretty sure liked me our last year or two in school, and they looked at me different, but it wasn't scary. They weren't always trying to get me alone with them, either."

"How does he try to get you alone?"

"One time I saw a little cut on my horse, Shadow. I was going to get some balm to put on it, but he started back to the tack room, too, saying he'd show me where it was. I told him I knew where it was and didn't need any help, but he said he didn't mind showing me. I didn't know what to do, but thankfully Papa called him then and he cursed under his breath, but turned around."

"I'm glad your father called for him."

"I was, too. Another time he came into the barn as I was putting the saddle on Shadow. He headed straight for me, so I asked him if

he needed something. He spoke real soft and said he just needed a few minutes alone with me. The look on his face scared me, so I spoke real loud when I called out for Clem, one of the hands that I knew was at the other end of the barn, checking on a new foal. I asked how the baby was doing. When he answered, Coy again cursed and said he didn't know anyone else was around."

"You didn't tell you father about those times?"

"No. He seems to really like Coy, and he thinks I'm just not giving him a fair chance. I thought maybe if I stayed out of the barn for a while, maybe in time he'll quit."

"But you love being out there, helping. You've helped your dad since you were a little girl, and we both know you'd much rather be out there than in here. He especially counts on you for helping him run the part of the ranch involving the horses. He himself says Coy knows cattle, but you're better with the horses."

"I know, but when I try to work with the horses, sometimes Coy shows up. For the time being, anyway, I don't want to take that chance. Maybe when Uncle Ralph and Aunt Jane come to visit, Eloise and I can spend our time together. With two of us surely he wouldn't dare try anything. If he looks at me in a scary way maybe she'll see it and can tell Papa she saw it, too."

"Two of you will definitely be safer, so maybe you can start going back out to the barn then. Let's hope Eloise likes to be around colts."

"The last time she was here she loved petting the animals, especially the smaller ones. I'm hoping she still does. At least if she sees the look he gives me and it looks creepy to her, too, I'll know it's not just my imagination."

"And if that happens, you let me or your father know. Maybe he can talk to Eloise and she can convince him it's not a proper way to look at you."

She nodded. "Thank you, Ella, for understanding and believing me."

"Of course I believe you. I don't think it's a matter of your father

not believing you, but if he hasn't seen any reason to doubt his foreman, he's probably thinking you're simply misinterpreting his looks."

"Maybe, but I don't know why he should have any reason to doubt his own daughter, either, but he does."

Ella went to Lizzie and wrapped her arms around her. "Let's hope he sees it that way soon, as well."