

I'm on a Ranch?

By

Misty Malone

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Chapter 1

Bryce Montgomery was exhausted. He'd been busy all day baling hay, and when they finally finished the west field he and his ranch hands went back to the barn to call it a day. The bunkhouse cook would have supper waiting for his hands. He, however, mounted his big gelding, Thunder, and headed out to check on the herd of cattle grazing in the far south pasture. His foreman, Landon, mounted his own horse and went to check on the herd in the southeast pasture.

They'd been struggling with predation lately. The government's program to protect wolves and grizzlies was controversial in these parts. While wolves were known to feast mostly on mice and rabbits, and take out the sick or dying herbivores, they would occasionally turn to beef. He couldn't shoot them, and guard dogs were not the answer, either. His only defense was to scare them off until the young calves were larger.

He kept his rifle handy, just in case, as he checked the herd. Everything looked good. There were small calves next to their mothers, and the herd seemed relaxed. He rode the area, scanning for any signs of danger. Luckily, he didn't see any bear or lion prints, and no signs of a recent kill. Satisfied, he headed back toward the house, ready to eat supper and take a shower. He was more than ready to quit for the day.

He reached into his pocket for his phone to call Landon, when it rang. "Hey, boss, I think you need to get over here right away."

Landon was not one to get riled easily, and the concern in his voice put Bryce on instant alert. He turned Thunder around as he asked, "Why, what's wrong? Another dead cow?"

"No, the cattle all seem to be fine. But there's a woman in a tree over here."

"There's a what?"

"There was a wolf looking up into a tree, and he wasn't acting right, so I thought I'd check it out. I figured it was some kind of animal that had taken refuge in the tree, but I couldn't figure out what kind would have the wolf so interested. When I got to the tree, it's not an animal, but a woman. She's up there, kind of curled around the trunk, lying on a couple big branches. I called out, but she hasn't moved. I'm afraid to be too loud and wake her and scare her. I don't want her falling out of the tree."

“Is she hurt?”

“I don't know,” Landon explained. “I don't see blood, but she hasn't moved. She's breathing, but I don't know if she's just sleeping, or unconscious.”

“I'm on my way. I will call for a rescue squad and the sheriff, just in case. Where are you?”

“I'm at the far end of the southeast pasture, right along the creek.”

“I'm on my way. Watch her and if she wakes up, make sure she doesn't fall out of the tree.”

“Got it.”

Bryce pushed Thunder into a gallop as he called 911 and got a rescue squad and deputy both on their way, and then called the bunkhouse. He quickly talked to Garrett, one of his hands who'd been with him several years, and told him what was going on and where to direct the deputy and squad.

He found Landon and assessed the situation. There was a young lady in his tree, just as Landon had described. He approached the lady carefully. “Ma'am, are you okay?” When he didn't get a response, he reached up and put his hand on her arm. Still no response. He moved to her head and touched his fingers to her neck, checking her pulse.

He turned to look at Landon. “It's weak, but steady. I'd say she's unconscious.” He got back on Thunder and approached her, taller now that he was on his horse. He could see more of her and did a cursory examination of her. He slid back down off of Thunder. “I don't see visible signs of injury, so let's try to get her down out of there so we can check her better. Be careful because once we move her she may come to, and we don't want to scare her and have her fight us.”

Landon nodded. “You're the guy with the EMT training. You just tell me what to do and I'll do it.”

Bryce smiled a little. “I'm glad I took that training, but I never thought I'd be using it to help a lady we found in a tree.” He looked the situation over again before telling Landon what he wanted to do and how he could help.

Five minutes later they had the lady on the ground, and she was coming around. Bryce knelt beside her, holding one of her hands in his, talking to her softly. “Miss, can you hear me? You're okay. You'll be all right.”

The young lady moved, like she was trying to sit up. Bryce held her in place. “Don't try to move yet, Miss. Are you okay? Do you feel pain anywhere?”

Her eyes fluttered a couple times before slowly opening. Bryce could see her trying to focus, and he saw the confused look on her face. “It's okay,” he assured her. “Do you feel pain anywhere?”

She slowly shook her head, still looking confused. She tried to talk, but no words came out.

“Wait a second,” Bryce advised. “Your throat's probably too dry to talk. Let me get you a drink.” He stayed with her, trying to soothe her as Landon got a bottle of water from his saddlebag. Bryce took the lid off the water. “We're going to help you sit up so you can drink a little of this.”

He and Landon lifted her shoulders enough that she could take a couple sips. Bryce pulled the bottle back, with a caution. “Go easy on that at first. Just take a few small sips to start with. Give your body time, then you can have a bit more.” He helped her do just that, keeping the bottle in his hand. After several series of small sips of water he and Landon eased her back down. “Did that help?”

She nodded and whispered a few words. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Are you okay?”

Bryce watched as the look on her face changed from confused, to concern, then neared panic. He rubbed her arm again. “It's okay, Miss. You're safe here. Can you tell me how you got in the tree?”

She looked at him with a look of shock. “I was in a tree?”

Bryce tried to hide his surprise. “Yes, ma'am, you were in this tree right here when we found you. Do you remember how you got there?”

The look of panic had returned, and she shook her head. “No.”

“That's okay,” Bryce assured her, “it's not important right now. Do you have any pain anywhere?” She shook her head. “Can you move your arms?” She moved both her arms as if questioning it herself.

“Good. How about your legs, can you move them for me?” She did as requested and was rewarded with a smile from Bryce. “Very good.”

Before he could ask anything else, she spoke. “Who are you, and where am I?”

“I'm sorry,” Bryce said with a smile for her. “I'm Bryce Montgomery, and you're on my ranch.”

Her eyes opened wide. “I'm on a ranch?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Bryce confirmed.

“Where at?”

Bryce was more than a little concerned by that question, but he didn't let it show. He simply smiled at the pretty young lady and answered. “You're on my ranch in Wyoming.” He chuckled a little as he continued, “I told you who I am. Can you tell me who you are, so I don't have to keep calling you Miss?”

She got a blank look on her face, but was quiet. When her face paled a bit, Bryce became concerned. “Miss, are you all right?”

“I don't know,” she whispered.

“You don't know if you're all right? Do you have some pain?”

“No, I mean I don't know who I am.” She had tears in her eyes as she finished the words.

He rubbed her hand with his thumb. “That's okay,” he tried to assure her. “That sometimes happens after some kind of trauma or scare. Just relax. It'll come back to you.”

“Boss, here comes the rescue squad,” Landon said.

“Go meet them where the lane ends,” Bryce instructed. “Tell them there's no road or lane on over here and have them wait there for the time being. I'll call you in a minute and we'll see what they want to do.”

Landon took off on his horse, and Bryce turned back to the mystery lady lying in front of him. “Miss, if I help you, can you sit up?”

“I think so,” she said.

He helped her, and she was soon sitting beside him. He let her rest several moments before speaking again. “Are you ready to stand?”

“I think so.”

“Let me help you try. Be careful, you may be weak.” He lifted her to her feet, but he could tell she was weak. He scooped her into his arms as if she weighed nothing.

“Oh, my,” she gasped.

“You're weak, I don't want you to fall and get hurt,” he said. “Put your arms around my neck. I'm going to carry you to the rescue squad.”

She looked upset. “You don't have to do that.”

“It’s okay,” he assured her. “You're such a tiny little thing, it's no problem carrying you. We don't know how long you've been in that tree, or how long since you've eaten anything or had any water. You need to go to the hospital so they can check you out. You’re probably dehydrated. Once you get some fluids in you, you'll start feeling better, I'm sure, and your strength will return.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, but she looked troubled. “Will I see you again, Bryce?”

“That kind of depends on you,” he said with a grin. “I'd like to come check on you later this evening or tomorrow to be sure you're okay. If you'd rather I didn't, though, I'll understand. I know you don't know me, but I'd like to change that, too. I'd like to think we could be friends.”

“I'd like that, too,” she whispered.

“Good. I like to get to know all the women I find in trees on my ranch,” he said with another smile. He knew she was upset, and he knew she had reason to be, but he hoped the light conversation would help keep her calm.

“I wish I knew who I am, or how I got here,” she whispered.

“Don't worry about it yet,” he suggested. “Give it time.”

Landon came riding over to them, which didn't surprise Bryce. “Hey, boss, I saw you bringing her over and figured that was why you didn't answer your phone.”

“Yeah, I heard it ring, but my hands were busy,” Bryce said. “Tell them to keep the gurney there, I'm fine with her.”

“Got it,” Landon said as he hurried back to the squad.

A few minutes later Bryce placed her on the gurney and spoke with one of the EMT technicians. “Hi, Tom. I take it Landon filled you in on where she was?”

“He said he found her in the tree,” the technician answered. “Any apparent injuries?”

“None that I could find. I did a quick check before getting her out of the tree and another, better one before helping her sit up. I didn't find any obvious injuries, and she denies any pain. She was unconscious, though, and has temporarily lost her memory, including her name. She's dehydrated. I gave her a few sips of water, but kept it minimal until she's checked. Her pulse was weak but steady, but is improving.”

“Okay, Bryce, we'll take it from here. It's nice having a fellow EMT do part of our work

for us,” Tom said with professional respect. Bryce had worked with them for several months while he was taking his EMT training, and Tom knew he was a good EMT. They told him if he ever got tired of ranching he had a job with them, but Tom knew his heart was in his ranch. That's why he'd taken the training in the first place. He wanted to know what to do in case of an emergency, especially since the ranch was a fair bit from the hospital.

“Take good care of her,” Bryce warned. “I'll be in to see how she's doing after I get some supper. She better not tell me you didn't treat her right.” They smiled at the good-natured ribbing.

Tom and his partner, Dustin, had been fastening her onto the gurney and were ready to load her into the rescue squad when she stopped them. “Wait a second.” She turned to Bryce. “Thank you, both of you, for all your help.”

Bryce took his hat off and smiled. “You're quite welcome, ma'am. It's what I do for all the pretty young ladies we find on my ranch.” He walked beside her as they went to the rescue squad. “I'll be in later tonight or tomorrow morning to make sure you're okay. A sheriff's deputy will be by, too, to ask you some questions. You take care and do what these men say. They're friends of mine and will take good care of you.” He saw a small smile on her face just before Dustin closed the back door of the rescue squad.

Bryce and Landon discussed their mystery guest as they rode back to the barn. When they got there a sheriff's deputy had just arrived and was waiting for them. “Good evening. I'm Deputy Connor Armstrong. Did I misunderstand something? I thought dispatch said you found a woman in a tree out here?”

“No, you heard right, Deputy,” Bryce said as he held his hand out to the deputy. “I'm Bryce Montgomery. This is my foreman, Landon Snyder. We were just on our way in to get some supper. Have you eaten?”

“Yes, I have, but you two go ahead, if you don't mind talking while you eat.”

“I'd appreciate that, Deputy. It's been a long day. Come on in and we'll get you some coffee or iced tea.”

They went to Bryce's house, where his cook and housekeeper, Lena, had supper ready. The three men were soon discussing Landon's discovery. “They took her to the ER,” Bryce said, “so you can talk to her there. But I've got to warn you, she must have amnesia. She doesn't know who she is or how she got either to my ranch, or more specifically to that tree. She's pretty upset about that, so go easy with her. It's got to be scary enough for her.”

“I understand, and I agree,” the deputy said.

“Do you have any idea who she could be or how she got to my ranch?”

“Not yet,” Deputy Armstrong answered, “but until we have something to go on, I suggest you have your men keep this quiet.”

Bryce was puzzled. “What has you concerned, Deputy?”

“We don't know anything about her, Bryce. She could be in trouble, running from someone. If that's the case, we don't want people knowing where she is. On the other hand, she could be running from something she's done.”

“No, I don't think so,” Bryce argued.

“Probably not,” Deputy Armstrong agreed, “but until we find out what the story is, we don't know. Either way, it'll be safer for her and everyone else if we keep this to ourselves.”

“I see your point,” Bryce conceded. “I'll talk to the men.”

Bryce and Landon finished supper and saw the deputy to his car before they both went to the bunkhouse. “By now I'm sure you've all heard the news,” Bryce started. “Does anyone have any idea how this young lady could have ended up in a tree on the ranch?”

When he got no response other than a couple snickers and the clown of the bunch suggesting perhaps she was manna from heaven, Bryce tried again. “Has anyone seen an abandoned car, or a loose horse? Anyone have any ideas how she may have gotten here?” When he still got no response he tried one last question. “Has anyone been in the area of the big southeast pasture in the last few days?”

“I was in the pasture the day before yesterday, boss,” Garrett offered, “but not down by the creek. I was in the upper portion of the pasture. The cattle were all up in that area, and I just went to check on them. When I saw they were all doing well, not agitated, I came back to the barn.”

“Okay. Deputy Armstrong wants us to keep this under wraps for a few days. She's having a problem with her memory and doesn't know who she is. Because of the circumstances, until we know who she is or where she's from, we're not to let anyone know we found a lady here, okay? She may be in some kind of trouble and we don't want anyone looking for her to know where she is. So until I tell you otherwise, don't mention a thing to anyone. Be especially careful Saturday night when you go into town. Don't be drinking and talking. Everyone understand?”

“We got it, boss,” Austin, one of the hands, assured him. “I have one question. Is she

pretty?"

Laughter broke out throughout, but Bryce felt protective of her. "That's irrelevant, Austin," he said in a serious manner. "Once we know she's not in any danger, you'll be free to talk about it with your friends, but until then, no one mentions a thing." He turned to leave and paused. He turned back toward Austin, who might be the clown of the bunch, but was also a very caring man. He hadn't meant to sound harsh. "But to answer your question, yes, she's very pretty." He grinned and added, "Not that I really noticed."

The chuckles and whooping and hollering told him there were no hurt feelings over the harsh tone he'd taken, which was as he wanted it. He had a good group of men working for him, and he was glad they all got along well and had fun together when the work was done.

Bryce dragged himself into the house and took a shower. His body was telling him to go to bed and get some sleep, but his mind wouldn't stop thinking about the mystery woman. He hadn't noticed at the time, but now as he thought about the whole scene and it replayed in his mind, she was a very pretty young lady.

She was small, petite he'd say. He doubted that she could have been more than an inch or two over five feet, with a small body structure. She wasn't skinny, though, which he was glad of. She looked like a woman, with curves. He hated the little skinny stick figures all the women today seemed to strive for. He liked a woman with a little meat on the bones, and she did, although he thought a little more wouldn't have hurt a thing.

Her hair was too dark to be called blond, but too light to be called brown. He'd once heard someone use the expression dirty blond. Maybe this color is what they were referring to. Whatever you want to call it, he liked it. It had streaks of lighter hair in it, but he was sure they were real, not the kind you get from a bottle. Those lighter streaks seemed to shine in the sun. Thinking about them, he wanted to run his fingers through her hair, and those pretty lighter streaks.

His mind played through all sorts of possibilities as to how she could have ended up on his ranch. The deputy was concerned, and the more he thought about it, so was he. Without knowing who she is or why she was on his ranch, or how she got up in that tree, there were just too many variables. She could be in some kind of danger. But the deputy was also right that she might be in trouble and running from the law. She sure didn't look like a fugitive, but he had to admit it was a possibility.

He finished his shower and got dressed. He couldn't stop wondering if she was okay and if they'd made any progress in finding her identity. He knew he'd never be able to sleep tonight if he didn't get some answers. Frustrated, he grabbed his hat, plopped it back on his head, hopped in his truck and headed for the hospital.

His frustration grew once he got to the hospital, however. He went to the ER and asked about the mystery lady. The receptionist asked, "What's the patient's name?"

"I just said I don't know what her name is," Bryce said, "and neither did she. That's why I'm concerned. I want to make sure she's okay."

"Well, if you don't have her name I can't look it up for you."

Bryce took a deep breath and exhaled slowly in an attempt to calm down. "But if she didn't know her name, what would you have done?"

"Well, that would just be silly. Everyone knows their name. If they're unconscious when they come in we get their name from a friend that's with them or from their purse or wallet."

"She didn't have either of those."

"Well, without her name I can't look it up."

"Do you have a record of someone coming in here tonight without knowing their name?"

"I don't know. My shift just started an hour ago. That's why I need her name."

"Is there someone else I could talk to? Are there any nurses that were here a few hours ago that might know?"

"Which nurse would you like to speak to?"

"Any nurse that's been here for several hours."

"We have lots of nurses working here. I need the name of the one you'd like to talk to."

Bryce closed his eyes and counted to ten. He opened them and was about to try again to explain the situation when he saw Deputy Armstrong. He was down the hall talking to one of the doctors. "Ma'am, could I talk to Deputy Armstrong? He's right there, speaking with a doctor."

"I'm sorry, you can't go back in there."

"Could you tell him I'd like to speak with him, please?"

"No, I'm sorry. I can't leave my desk."

"Is there someone else that could tell him I'd like to speak with him?"

"Like who?"

Bryce was about to pull his hair out when Deputy Armstrong turned and saw him. He

waived, and luckily the deputy saw him and held a finger up. He finished speaking with the doctor and came to the receptionist's desk. "Good evening, Bryce."

"Good evening, Deputy. Can you tell me anything about the young lady found on my ranch today? Is she okay?"

"She's been admitted, but she's going to be okay. My understanding is she was dehydrated and weak. They've got an IV in her, but the doctor says she's improving."

"Do you know where she is? Can I see her? Has she remembered who she is yet?"

The deputy chuckled as he pulled Bryce off to the side. "Are you concerned about her, or wanting to get to know her?"

"I think a little of both," Bryce admitted. "I've never found anyone in a tree on my land before, and yes, I am a little concerned. Do you know anything about her yet? Do you know if she's in any kind of danger?"

The deputy spoke softly. "Not really. She hasn't regained her memory yet, so we don't know much. I've done some checking as to how she may have gotten there. There was an abandoned vehicle, but it was several miles from where you found her. It was reported three days ago. We're looking into that now. It was towed to the county lot and so far no one's claimed it."

"So it could be hers?" Bryce said more than asked.

"It could be, although several miles is quite a distance. If your vehicle breaks down and you start walking you generally stay on the road. There were several houses within site of the vehicle and you would think you'd go to one of them. We have a deputy out checking with the homes in the area to see if anyone came to their door."

"Why would you abandon your car and walk several miles through fields and pastures, to climb into a tree? And why was she unconscious?"

"All very good questions. I wish I had answers for them," Deputy Armstrong said. "There's a good chance that car's not hers, just an abandoned car. We ran the plates on the car, which was from out of state, and they came back to a lady. We're trying to contact her now, see what she can tell us about the car. It may have been stolen. They're often abandoned on back roads."

"Will you keep me informed, Deputy, as to what you find?"

"I think we can do that, yes."

"Can I see her?"

“I’ll see what I can do, Bryce. I’ve explained the situation to the doctor, and he’s agreed to limit the visitors until we find out who she is. I’ll take you up to the floor she’s on and introduce you to the nurses. They’ve been told no visitors except law enforcement and the ranch owner until further notice.”

“Thanks for including me, Deputy.”

“When I talked to her she asked about you. She said you seemed nice and asked if you were someone she could trust. The EMTs that brought her in assured her she could absolutely trust you. She looked happy to hear that, and said you’d said you would try to make it in to see her, so I included you in her allowed visitors. She’s pretty anxious, which I understand, and we’re hoping she’ll see you as an old friend, which may be calming to her.”

Deputy Armstrong introduced him to the nurses, promised to keep Bryce informed, and left. Bryce went into her room, and froze. She was sleeping, and she was even prettier than he’d remembered. Her long hair had been in a ponytail of sorts when he saw her earlier, but it was free now and was very pretty. She looked so small lying in that bed, and vulnerable. His protective instincts seemed to kick in and he felt a need to shield her. He wasn’t sure what she needed shielded from, but whatever it was, he was determined to protect her.

He moved closer to the bed, still watching her sleep. She looked peaceful, and that brought a smile to his face. He was still standing at the foot of her bed, watching her, when her eyes fluttered open.

“Hi, there,” he said with a smile.

“Hi, Bryce,” she answered. “I’m glad you came in.”

He sat down in the chair beside her bed. “Why, are you okay? Is there something I can get for you?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “I was so weak, but I’m feeling better now. I was hoping you’d stop in so I could thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” Bryce said. “I didn’t really do anything.”

“I know I was weak out there and I don’t remember everything, but I do remember a few things. I remember you assuring me I’d be okay. I appreciated that so much. I was really scared, and your voice seemed so soothing.”

“I’m glad,” he said.

“I remember you carrying me to the rescue squad, too. Thank you for everything you did

for me.”

“You're welcome. How are you feeling?”

“I'm still tired, but I'm a lot better than I was. I think they put some kind of miracle juice in this IV. I was so tired I could hardly talk, but this stuff really perked me back up.”

“It's mostly just fluids,” Bryce explained. “You were dehydrated when we found you. It may have been a couple days you were there, without food or water.”

“I'm so glad you found me and helped me.”

Bryce noticed a few unshed tears in her eyes and knew she was scared. He gently picked one of her hands up and patted it. “Me, too,” he assured her. “But you're okay now. Don't cry, honey. You don't have any extra fluids in you yet.”

His smile seemed to calm her, and she had to laugh. “Are you a doctor? You seemed to know what to do out there, and you knew about me needing fluids.”

“No, I'm not a doctor, but I took some EMT training. We had a guy that got gored one time on the ranch and I felt so helpless. I called 911, but I had no idea what to do for him until the rescue squad got there. I took the training so at least I'll know what to do for someone until help gets there.”

She smiled up at him, and he thought again how pretty this little lady is. “You did that, took that training so you could help your employees?”

He chuckled at her use of the word employees. “Yes, I guess. I think of my ranch hands more as family than employees, but yeah, they're the reason I took the classes. I stress safety on my ranch, but accidents still happen. At least now I know what to do for them. But enough about me. How are you doing? I'm glad you're getting your strength back, but did they find any injuries? How about your memory, have you had any luck with it yet?”

“They didn't find any injuries other than a lump on my head. They said that was why I was unconscious when you found me. Apparently if you get hit on the head you can have a concussion and that makes you sleepy. They said if you go a couple days sleeping with a concussion, but without food or water, you can slip into unconsciousness.”

Bryce nodded his head, knowing what she said was true. “Well, then that means you were probably out there a couple days. I hate that you went that long without any of us noticing you. That probably means the concussion was fairly serious, or you wouldn't have slept that long. That also explains the amnesia.”

“You sound like my doctor,” she said with a smile. “That's what he said.”

“Then he also told you not to worry about your memory, that it would more than likely come back as your concussion heals?”

“He did,” she said. “But I wish it would hurry up. I hate not knowing who I am.”

“I can understand that,” he said as he patted her hand again. “If there's anything I can help you with, please tell me. If there's something you'd like to have to read or eat, I'll get it for you.”

“Thank you, Bryce, but you've done enough. Your wife isn't too impressed with you coming to see me this evening. I'll have to apologize to her.”

“I'm not married,” he said, “so don't worry about that. I'm not seeing anyone, either, so no one's upset with me coming to see you. But I mean what I say about letting me know if there's anything I can do for you, okay?”

“Thank you.” She turned quiet and looked upset.

“What's wrong?” he asked. “Are you feeling bad, should I call a nurse?”

“No, no, nothing like that. I was just thinking about something.”

“What's that?”

“I'm glad you don't have a wife I'm upsetting, but I wonder if I have a husband.”

Again he patted her hand. “This has to be hard for you, I know. But try not to worry about it too much, okay? It'll come back to you in time.”

“I hope so,” she said. “And I hope it hurries.”

“I take it patience isn't one of your strong suits?” Bryce asked with a grin.

“Apparently not,” she said, looking a little sheepish. “But I can't say for sure.”

They both chuckled a little. He changed the subject, and they visited a little longer. He got up to leave and was happy when she asked if he'd come back to see her again if he had a chance. He promised he would.