

## Prologue

*Ah, things are progressing nicely with these stubborn cowboys—even if I do say so myself.*

Ozzie Peyton gave a jaunty wink to the portrait over the fireplace and was fairly certain his sweet Vanessa winked back. The love of his life, she'd gone to the hereafter just last year, and it was a balm to his soul that she still spoke to him now and again to keep him on track and save the days and long nights from being so lonely. She didn't approve of every little decision he made, but she was such a good woman about it.

She'd always been that way, and it was a crying shame they'd never been blessed with children of their own. Vanessa, a schoolteacher all her life, would have been the best of mothers.

Realizing he was digressing, Ozzie turned his attention back to his journal writing.

*In our wildest dreams, Lloyd, Henry, Vern and me never dreamed things would turn out so good. We're still takin' our time so as not to make any rash or wrong moves. And so far so good. But as my Vanessa has told me, we can't be takin' over the good Lord's job too much—even though I pointed out that we was just helpin' since He is likely a busy man and could use the extra hand or two to lay the groundwork.*

*But here I go again, getting off the subject. That's been happenin' a lot lately. Maybe I ought to try me some of them new herbs that're supposed to boost the brainpower.*

*Anyway, Wyatt and Hannah Malone are happy as all get-out and make the best family picture with that cute little boy of Hannah's, Ian, and Hannah with her tummy all round with child. Not Wyatt's seed, but his child nonetheless. That boy's power to love just plum amazes me. And it especially touches my heart on account of Vanessa and me not having the pitter-patter of little feet in our own home.*

*And Ethan and Dora Callahan. There was a long shot if I ever thought of one. A preacher's daughter and a playboy cowboy, whose carousing days actually did come back to bite him in the keister. But that baby girl, Katie...I tell you, she's a cutie. And Dora, feisty little thing, just the match for Ethan. The boy never knew what hit him. 'Course when I heard about the puppy poop in the boots and the kitten hair in the hat, me and Vern and Henry and Lloyd had a bit of a pause. After all, a cowboy's boots and hat are sacred. But ya just can't get all het up over Dora and her taking in every stray animal and making those cute drawings of them that she sells to greetin' card companies and the like.*

*So, now we've had us a good success with advertising for women in the magazines, and that bachelor auction that gave us all a new set of wiry gray hairs. But it all turned out for the best. And we got plenty of women who've come to town and are thinking of stayin'.*

*Now that's all well and good, but ya just never know what'll happen if somebody drops the ball. That's what me, Vern, Lloyd and Henry were just talkin' about the other day.*

*And that's how come we decided to give Stony Stratton a bit of a nudge. A nicer fellow you'd never meet. But he don't know the value of his qualities. And that sweet little girl of his, just cryin' out for a mama—not that Stony's not doing a mighty fine job all on his own. But still, there's work to be done here.*

*So when Lottie told us about Eden Williams's problems, the boys and me couldn't help but have our hearts ripping open and bleeding a bit at the shame of it all. Especially seeing as how our purpose is to show the men of Shotgun Ridge the merits of marriage and procreating, just like the Good Lord intended.*

*Vanessa wasn't happy about that little lie we done told, but she's a forgiving woman, and in the end I think she secretly believes we done right—she's just got to keep up her fussin' at me for appearance sake, and I sure do love her for that.*

*Besides, it was only one of them white lies...well, all right, it was dingy white with a bit of gray around the edges, but still, we got a responsibility to uphold, to our town and to our future.*

*We've laid the path. Now we just gotta hope old Stony Stratton will walk on down it. Especially when he hears exactly what Eden Williams wants—no, what she needs from him....*

## Chapter 1

Stony Stratton leaned against the porch rail and watched the racy convertible spit dust beneath its tires as it barreled toward the ranch. In the paddocks, million-dollar Thoroughbreds lifted elegant heads, nostrils flaring, tracking the progress of the sporty car as it whizzed past stables, the round training pens and storage barns, then wheeled up the circular driveway toward the house.

Another interruption in a list of many these past three days, Stony thought. Normally he was a pretty easygoing guy. But his life had suddenly turned upside down, and his frustration level was creeping up.

He still couldn't believe his housekeeper had taken off on him the way she had. Lottie Driscoll and her husband, Ray, had been with him for fifteen years. They'd cried with him when his grandmother had died and bolstered him during the two years of his disastrous marriage.

The woman was as sturdy as they came, had faced rattlers in the yard, blizzards, a skunk rooting in the kitchen pantry, bloody cowboys who'd tangled with an ornery stallion, and the death of a child, yet an accidental fire set to the kitchen curtains several days ago had sent her into a dither.

In a fit of dramatics, his steady, practical housekeeper had packed her bags, claiming she needed a vacation, and had abandoned him, taking her husband—who was their all-around handyman—with her. It was the damndest thing. So out of character.

If he wasn't so level-headed, he might think the townsfolk had somehow roped Lottie into their crazy conspiracy to marry off the bachelors of Shotgun Ridge. But that scenario didn't seem to fit, and he'd already concluded he was fairly safe on that score.

Stony knew what he saw in the mirror every morning, and he didn't kid himself. He didn't have the looks his friends and neighbors, Wyatt Malone and Ethan Callahan, had. He was a big hulk, who communicated better with animals than he did with people.

And according to his ex-wife, there wasn't much to recommend him as husband material. He caught himself reaching for his face but checked the action, feeling his gut tighten in a way it hadn't in a long time.

He had no idea why he was thinking about the scheming geezers, other than the fact that he knew just about every vehicle in this part of Montana, and that fire-engine-red Mustang wasn't one he recognized. Nor was the woman driving it.

"Who's that, Daddy?"

With his gaze on the woman now alighting from the car, Stony held out his hand for his five-year-old daughter, Nicole.

"Let's go find out," he said quietly. Stony rarely spoke above a strong murmur. He was a man who watched, listened.

He squinted against the sun and felt the scar at the side of his eye crinkle and fold in on itself. With Nikki's hand swallowed in his huge palm, he tugged his white Stetson lower on his brow and gave Nikki's dog a gentle command to stay.

The woman grabbed a guitar case from the back seat, turned in a circle to take in her surroundings, then smiled and moved forward, her right hand extended.

"Hi. I'm Eden Williams. My aunt Lottie told me you were looking for a housekeeper."

Her *aunt* Lottie? Stony tipped his head in a nod and accepted her handshake. My God she was beautiful. No way would she do as a live-in housekeeper-nanny. Beauty and the beast didn't cohabit well.

"And this must be Nicole," she said, dropping to one knee in front of the little girl while Stony was still trying to corral his heart.

"Yep," Nikki confirmed. "You talk funny."

"Nikki," Stony admonished gently.

"Well, she does."

Eden laughed. "It's my Texas accent. So, what do you think? Is it a good kind of funny or a weird kind?"

Nikki considered for a minute. "Good kind. Did you know Lottie caught the curtains on fire?"

"Mmm, that's sort of why I'm here."

"Are *you* gonna catch the curtains on fire?"

"No, silly." Her laughter was soft and genuine. "I'm here to take care of you and your daddy."

Ah, hell. He wished she hadn't said anything in front of Nikki. Now he was going to have to come up with a good excuse for not hiring her and explain it to both the woman *and* his daughter.

"What's in there?" Nikki pointed to the gleaming rosewood case at Eden's feet.

"My guitar. I like to think I can carry a tune, and a little background music disguises the rough spots. Do you like to sing?"

Nikki nodded. "My uncle Ethan—well, he's not *really* my uncle, but sort of, you know?"

Eden nodded and Stony realized he had yet to speak to her or take his gaze from her. Her auburn hair was long and straight, curling slightly at the ends, held back off her face by glittering butterfly clips. With her flared jeans and snug top, she looked a bit like a sixties flower child.

"Anyway," Nikki continued, "Uncle Ethan taught me numbers with the bottles of beer, but Daddy didn't think it was appropriate, so we had to do it with milk. Want me to sing it for you?"

Before Stony could object, Eden nodded and Nikki belted out the first notes.

"One bottle of milk on the wall, one bottle of milk, put one up and go back to the truck, and there's two bottles of milk on the wall." She went through several more verses, holding out another finger each time to keep track of which number she was on.

"That's wonderful," Eden said. "And ingenious to go forward rather than backward." She stood and swayed slightly.

Stony immediately reached out to steady her. "Careful." It was his natural instinct to protect—an ingrained trait.

"Thanks." Her smile knocked him straight in the solar plexus, and he told himself to get a grip. She didn't need him to take care of her. The woman was looking for a job. That's all she would want from him.

"You have a beautiful place here." She looked out at the ranch, but Stony kept his gaze on her. "Aunt Lottie said you're a horse whisperer?"

"Trainer," he corrected.

"And in mighty tall cotton by the look of the place."

*Tall...? Oh. Successful.* He shrugged, not one to boast.

She gave him another soft smile, this one obviously for his modesty, and he noted twin dimples in her pale cheeks. Her coloring was different from that of skin simply kept out of the sun. The darkness beneath her eyes made him wonder if she'd been ill. And he had no business wondering about Eden Williams's health.

"Being family and all, I'm surprised you've never been out to visit your aunt and uncle."

"Aunt Lottie's a lot like your Nikki's Ethan, I suspect. She was my mom's best friend and lived close by throughout my growing up years. Not related by blood, but loved nonetheless."

"Like me and Daddy," Nikki said.

Eden looked from the little girl to him. Stony wasn't in the mood to go into his background with a virtual stranger. She'd more than likely not be staying.

He cupped Nikki's shoulder. "Nik, why don't you take Rosie in and feed her."

“Oh.” Nikki glanced at the dog, then her brows suddenly winged up. She lifted one of the black setter’s ears, whispered into it, then dropped it back in place and straightened. “Okay. Rosie said she’s hungry. Come in and see my room, Eden.” Full of energy, she took off like a shot, bounding up the porch steps with the dog on her heels.

“She’s a doll baby,” Eden said.

“Yes.” And up to something, he thought with an inward sigh. He’d seen it in the sparkle of her eye. “How long have you been in town?”

“Not long. I came when Aunt Lottie called.”

He saw her glance away. It was a subtle shift, but he was trained to notice nuances. Being raised by a deaf grandmother who’d communicated with gestures and expressions made him sensitive to the actions of others. It’s what gave him an edge with the animals and made him who he was.

He wondered what Eden Williams was hiding.

“Lottie called you?”

“Mmm. She really hated to leave you in the lurch.”

Stony nearly snorted, but merely frowned instead. He didn’t recall Lottie seeming all that concerned when she’d been pressing her hand to her bosom and imitating a drama queen.

“So...you just came out? No questions asked? You don’t have another job waiting for you back in Texas?” Lottie had left three days ago. Eden would have had to react immediately, dropping everything to get to Montana to take her aunt’s place.

“Actually, I did ask a few questions,” she said softly, her green eyes focusing on him with what appeared to be hope and trust. She didn’t elaborate on what those questions had been, and Stony found himself suddenly and inexplicably curious.

“As for my job,” she continued, “I’m partners in a catering business. But I needed time off.”

Obviously that runs in the family, he thought. “Why?”

There it was again. That subtle skittering of her eyes, a blink.

“I just needed time for me. I’ve been so caught up in work I hadn’t realized I’d neglected some personal things that are important to me. Aunt Lottie suggested I come to Shotgun Ridge, that it would be a nice change of pace.”

“For how long?”

She shrugged. “For a while, at least. There’s no telling how long it’ll take Aunt Lottie to get over her stress....” She laughed and touched his arm. “I understand that look. And believe me, I was as surprised as you when she told me the story about the curtains and the need for time off because of it. In any case, you’ll be getting a great deal. I love kids and I’m an excellent cook.”

He shouldn’t even be considering this. He’d had someone more matronly in mind for the job. But so far none of the older women in town had responded to his plea for help—and he hadn’t dared ask any of the single women new to town that Ozzie and his friends had rounded up with their crazy marriage campaign.

He wasn’t stepping into that trap.

“Where are you staying?”

She frowned. “I thought...well, um, here, of course.”

He didn’t see that there was any “of course” about it. He only needed help during the day. The evenings he could handle himself.

Aside from the fact that having a beautiful woman live with him would drive him to distraction, Nikki was young and impressionable. Clearly, Eden Williams was a woman who would be easy to fall in love with. And Nikki fell in love easily. To form an attachment, only to have Eden leave, would be hard on her.

And Stony didn’t kid himself that she would stay. Beautiful women didn’t. Unless they were paid handsomely or were offered something valuable in return. And even then there were no guarantees.

He turned his head slightly to the right, a subconscious gesture to shield the flawed part of his face.

“I hadn’t planned to hire someone full-time or permanent.” Especially a beautiful young woman with pale skin and green eyes and a body that made him yearn. “I’d heard the Widows Bagley were renting out rooms in town.”

“Oh, no. I need to stay here....I mean, it’ll be much more convenient. Lottie and Ray had a room, didn’t they?” There was desperation in her tone and a slight tremble in her fingers as she clasped them together in front of her.

His protective instincts reared again, and he tried like crazy to ignore them. “They had a room. But it’s just Nikki and me in the house.”

“And isn’t that why you need me?”

He had a sinking feeling he could come to need her too much. And in a much different way. “I meant that it might not look proper—you being so young and all.”

Her laughter startled a magpie off the fence post and held Stony spellbound for several seconds. The drum of hooves as one of the handlers put a horse through its paces faded into the background.

“I’m thirty-four, Stony. Hardly a young maiden in need of a chaperone.”

Those killer dimples might well get the better of him. As it was, his judgment was skewed. That was the only explanation he could come up with when he found himself looking toward her flashy convertible, asking her if she had luggage, inviting her inside. Sometimes he wondered if he was a throwback to another era. He didn’t think or operate in the free-and-easy, casual way that most of his friends did.

Eden followed Stony around the back of the house and in through the kitchen door. Apparently, he was used to entering this way—not suggesting she use the back door like the help. She smiled to herself and imagined he’d be horrified if she made mention of it, even in jest.

Lottie had told her quite a bit about Stony Stratton. A giant, Gentle Ben type, she'd said, who speaks softly to women and children, leaving melted hearts in his wake—and he never even recognized it. A tough, six-foot-five cowboy with a fierce frown and a heart as big as Texas.

And Eden was counting on that big heart. She was on a mission, and the clock was ticking.

Stony Stratton was her hope.

She felt the familiar lethargy pull at her and pressed a hand to her stomach. *Not yet, she prayed. Please, just give me a week to settle in.*

Her weariness abated somewhat when she got a look at the kitchen. A chef would be in hog heaven for sure. It had to be twenty by twenty in size, with a work station in the center, cabinets galore painted glossy white with crystal knobs, a restaurant-grade stove and sparkling, rich granite countertops. The room was clean and straight except for a step stool pushed up against the refrigerator and an open pantry door.

“Oh, my.” Her reverent tone drew Stony’s gaze. His eyes softened and smiled, but his lips didn’t follow. That was okay. Lottie had warned Eden about his solemn countenance, but hadn’t gone into detail about what might have made him that way.

“Lottie supervised a remodeling project a few years back.”

“I know. Since I cook for a living, she consulted me on a couple of things. I feel as though I’m getting reacquainted with an old friend.” She ran a hand over the mirror-smooth granite and smiled softly when a little girl’s delighted giggle rang out. Following the sound, she peeked behind the open pantry door where Nikki was hiding.

Eden’s smile turned to a grin. Nikki was giving the black setter—Rosie, she recalled—a lick of her frozen juice bar.

She glanced at Stony. “Guess we know what Nikki and Rosie were whispering about outside.” She didn’t imagine this was what he’d had in mind when he’d asked his daughter to feed the dog.

“Look, Daddy! She likes it.”

“So I see,” Stony said, his tone easy and even. “Remember that she doesn’t do well with too many sweets.” For Eden’s benefit he added, “There was an incident a while back with the contents of the sugar bowl at Nikki’s pretend tea party. It got messy.”

“Yeah, Rosie barfed, and Lottie wouldn’t clean it up.”

“I’m sure Rosie didn’t mean to barf,” Eden said, and Nikki went into a gale of giggles, pulling her hand back to have a lick of sticky red ice that dripped down her little arm.

The sound of a happy child wrapped itself around Eden’s heart and squeezed. Unbidden, a lump formed in her throat.

She turned to Stony, startled to find him watching her. Quietly. Easily. Steadily. A funny tickle shivered through her stomach, and she wasn’t sure if it was nerves or attraction. A little of both, she suspected.

He was overwhelmingly big, yet she didn’t feel threatened. Excited, yes, and scared, but of her own feelings, not of him.

Eden broke eye contact first. Clearing her throat, she tugged at her top. “Well...”

He nodded as though acknowledging her nervousness. “I’ll show you Lottie and Ray’s room.” Picking up her suitcase, he exited the kitchen by way of the service porch. A glance over his shoulder at Rosie had the dog’s ears drooping and with a final longing look at the ice pop, she lay down and rested her muzzle on her front paws.

Eden was impressed. Watching the dog instead of where she was going, she slammed into Stony’s back when he stopped at the threshold of a suite of rooms off the kitchen.

“Steady,” he said.

“Yes...well.” She couldn’t recall ever being so tongue-tied around a man. “Were you and Rosie communicating telepathically?”

“No need. She knows what’s allowed and what’s not.”

He set her suitcase on the bed, then turned around, those amber eyes focusing on hers with an intensity she was coming to expect. It was as though he saw inside her, and that unnerved her even more.

She wasn’t ready for him to see her flaws—or her quiet desperation.

“You’re tired.” He raised his hand, as though he intended to touch her face, then let it drop as he stepped back. “Rest awhile, settle in, then we’ll talk about the terms of employment—salary and such.”

With an economy of moves, he left the room, his boot heels barely making a sound against the hardwood floor, which was surprising given his size.

When he was gone, she lowered herself to the bed, momentarily giving in to the lack of energy, feeling a twinge of the cramping that had become all too familiar.

She would rest for just a few minutes, she promised herself as she closed her eyes, holding the edge of the bedspread in her hands.

Stony Stratton was everything Aunt Lottie had said he’d be...and more.

He didn’t have the smooth, pretty-boy looks of a male print model, but he had something even better. He had presence, a masculinity that radiated from him in sensual waves. A quiet reverence and inner spirit that spoke loud and clear, even when he didn’t.

He was a man who would care. And care deeply.

She vowed to be very careful with his heart.

The urge to rush was almost overwhelming. But she cautioned herself to slow down, give him a chance to warm up to her before she told him her real reason for coming.

The reason Aunt Lottie had invented that cockamamie story so she could leave.