

Never Again

By

Misty Malone

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-412-6
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Chapter One

Ty Livingston leaned back in the chair he'd flopped down in on his front porch and stretched his long legs out in front of him. He looked out over the ranch that had been his grandfather's and sighed. He'd inherited it four years ago, but it had taken until now for it to settle into his head that his grandfather was no longer here, and he was finally starting to feel comfortable that the ranch was indeed now his. It was even beginning to feel like home to him. "That was a long week. I'm glad it's over, but we sure got a lot done," he said before taking a swig of the beer in his hand.

"That's for sure," Wyatt Worthington, his ranch foreman and best friend, agreed. "You've got a good group of hands now since you hired those last three. We're all starting to work together like a well-oiled machine."

Ty looked over at Wyatt and smiled. "That was one of my grandfather's favorite phrases. You almost sounded like him just now when you said it."

"He's where I picked the phrase up. I'd heard it said once or twice before, but you're right; he used it a lot—enough that he's got me saying it now." Both men were quiet a few minutes, both deep in thought. "I miss him. He was a good man."

"You'll get no argument from me on that," Ty said. "I miss him, too. From the time I was still little I remember coming here and spending at least a few weeks with him and Grandma every summer. I looked forward to school being out because I knew it meant a visit here."

"I remember how excited you always were before you left, and I loved hearing the stories you told once you came back. I think those stories had a lot to do with my wanting to work on a ranch when I was old enough."

"I always knew I wanted to be on a ranch. Even though Dad did everything he could to talk me out of it, I never lost my dream. I always had a plan, and it was to be a ranch hand for several years, then I hoped to eventually become a foreman somewhere."

"I assumed you always figured you'd work here, on this ranch, and some day it would be yours," Wyatt said.

"You know, it's funny, but I never once thought that. I used to hope Grandpa would hire me some day as a hand, but I never thought of someday owning it."

Wyatt turned his head to look at the man who had been his best friend since they were kids growing up across the street from each other. "Seriously? Even when we were in high school and you spent all summer here working for him, you didn't just assume you'd work here once you were out of school, and own it some day?"

"Nope, I never did." Ty was quiet a few moments. "Maybe I never wanted to consider the possibility that some day Grandpa would be gone. Whenever I thought of the ranch, I always pictured us working here together."

Wyatt glanced over at his friend again, nodding. "I can totally believe that, and I understand it. I know you were awfully close to him."

"Yeah, I was. I think we both had ranching in our blood. It must have skipped a generation, though, because Dad wasn't at all like us. He always drilled it in my head that ranching was okay for a summer job when you were in school, but it wasn't something you'd want to make a career of. He always talked about when I'd go off to college, and encouraged me to give some thought to what profession I wanted to go into. I know he always kind of hoped I'd follow in his footsteps

and be an attorney some day, so he could welcome me into his law firm.”

“What did he have against ranching?”

“He always said it was a lot of work for not much money. He told me I could make ten times the money as an attorney in a good firm.”

“Money isn’t everything,” Wyatt said casually.

“You’d have a hard time convincing him of that. Money is important to Dad, but it’s more than that. He likes to hobnob with people who have not only money, but power and position. That stuff’s important to him, but he can have it.”

“Not for you?”

“Oh, hell, no,” Ty said with a chuckle. “Going to all those parties and big events would drive me crazy. Wearing a suit and tie to work every day would be hard enough, but those big parties and black tie affairs would be more than I could handle.” He sighed and crossed his ankles as he took another swig of his beer. “Nope, give me this any day,” he said, waving his arm to indicate the pastures full of horses and cattle.

“I hear you. The summer before our junior year in high school, when you talked your grandfather into hiring me as a ranch hand, is something I’ll never forget. I’d visited here with you on a couple occasions, but that was my first time actually working on a ranch, and I had a ball all summer. Even the long days that were a lot of hard work, it was learning something new, and I didn’t complain.”

“I know,” Ty said with a grin as he thought back. “Grandpa said you took to ranching like a duck to water. He had several of those phrases he used a lot. It’s like I can still hear him saying that. Boy, do I miss that man.”

“Yeah, we both do. After we graduated from high school and we worked for him that summer, I felt bad, guilty almost, when you had to leave for college while I got to stay here.”

“You felt bad, really? I hated going off to college, knowing you got to stay here. It didn’t seem fair to me, but I wasn’t upset with you about it. I was upset with my parents. They were the ones making me go.”

“How upset was your dad when you took classes for running a ranch instead of for being an attorney?”

“He wasn’t happy, but Mom convinced him that at least I was going and would have a degree. He growled and called it a damn ranching degree, but he guessed there were worse things.”

Now Wyatt had to laugh. “I can hear your dad saying that. So how upset was he when you got your degree and went to work here?”

“Again, he wasn’t happy about it, but I think he always assumed once I started working here full-time I’d see how much work it is and I’d be ready to find a better job. Then once Grandpa got sick I think Dad was kind of glad I was here.”

“I know your grandfather was glad you were here when he got sick. Not just because you were here with him, sharing meals and things, but for the ranch, too. You’d been working here for three years then, and he knew you were capable of running it.”

“He knew you were capable of running it. He had a lot of confidence in you, Wyatt. I know he did because he told me so. That’s why he made you foreman shortly after he started getting sick.”

“You know, that surprised all of us, especially me, when he did that.”

Ty took another swig of his beer as he looked over at Wyatt, obviously surprised by his words. “Why did it surprise you? You’d been here longer than anyone else by then, except George, and he’d made it clear he wasn’t interested in being a foreman. Well, and Jake, but he was talking

about retirement, so no one expected him to be named the new foreman. Why was anyone surprised that he gave it to you?"

Wyatt, who had been reclining in the chair next to Ty and drinking his own beer, sat up and turned to him, shaking his head. "Everybody thought you'd be the next foreman. After all, even if you disregard the fact that you were his grandson, you'd been visiting him and helping every summer from the time you were in grade school. You grew up working there every summer. You went off to college to study animal husbandry and business and other things that would benefit the ranch, so when Garrett bought his own ranch and quit, everyone just assumed you would be the next foreman, and everyone was good with that."

Ty was quiet for several long minutes. "I didn't know that," he finally said. "I never actually thought of it, either, because I always just worked with Grandpa."

"Looking back on it now, it's quite clear to me that he was priming you all along to take over the ranch. You're right in that you always worked with him, but the last year or two, you were more than just one of the hands."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You never saw it, and frankly, neither did I until after he passed, but now it's plain that he was training you. You were kind of on the same level as Garrett when he was the foreman, like a co-foreman with him."

Ty shook his head. "He was always the foreman."

"Yes, but you were kind of between Garrett and your grandfather. I think he was training you for his position." Ty looked skeptical, but Wyatt persisted. "Think about it. Since the foreman always ate his meals with your grandfather, and you as his grandson ate with him, too, that meant the three of you ate together, and talked about work while you ate. You worked with Garrett closer than the rest of us did, too, maybe because of that. I'm convinced he was training you to take over, and I think Garrett knew it. That's why he talked things over with you if your grandfather wasn't around, like when he started getting sick. I also think that's why he made me the foreman. He knew we've been friends a long time and work well together."

Ty's eyebrows raised, but he thought about his friend's words. "I guess he did train me. I never thought about it before, but you're right." After another spell of silence, he went on. "And that explains why he seemed happy that since he made you the foreman we would be working together. I thought he just meant we'd be working together like I worked with Garrett. Trust me, though, he gave you that position because you earned it. He would not have given it to you just so the two of us could work together."

Wyatt shrugged. "Maybe. I still think he trained you to take over his ranch. He was a smart man and he certainly knew ranching."

"I won't disagree there. I also think he made you his foreman because he knew you're also a smart man who certainly knows ranching."

"Well, I'm smart enough to know that you've got this ranch under control now, and it's time for you to start looking for a lady to share your life with."

Ty laughed out loud. "Trust me, Wyatt, there's nothing I'd like better. After Lisa, though, I'm very hesitant."

"I completely understand your reluctance," Wyatt said with a laugh, "but you've got to get back up on the horse. You have to get out there and try again."

"It's not that easy. You know what kind of relationship I'm looking for, and it's not that easy to come across a nice lady who's looking for the same thing. You're lucky you found someone with similar interests. I envy you for it, but they're hard to find."

“You need to get out there and start looking, though. Today’s Friday. As soon as I have enough strength I’m going to take a shower and pick Tara up and we’re going to town for dinner. Why don’t you go with us? You won’t find anyone if you don’t ever get off the ranch.”

“Thanks, but I’m staying home tonight. I’m worn out.”

“Why don’t you plan now to go into town with us tomorrow night? We’ll go have a few drinks with dinner. There’s always lots of single women around. They flirt with you all the time, so I know you wouldn’t have any trouble meeting one. You just have to be willing to give one of them a chance and get to know them.”

“And what do you suggest I do; go over to a group of them and tell them I’m looking for a nice lady who’s willing to let me spoil them when they behave, but put them over my knee and warm their cute little behind when they don’t? No, thanks. After the debacle with Lisa, I’m not willing to take another chance yet.”

“Oh, come on, it wasn’t that bad. You have to get back on the horse.”

“Wasn’t that bad? Let me remind you she had every intention of calling the police.”

“But she didn’t. I know the gist of what happened, but you never did tell me what was behind it, what caused all the fuss.”

“I kept warning her about her attitude, and when she lied to me one more time, then gave me attitude when I called her on it, I couldn’t take it any more. I pulled her over my knee and gave her a light spanking, thinking it would get her attention, and she’d finally listen to me and hear what I’d been saying. Instead, as soon as I quit, she jumped up and ran for the door. I barely got to her so I could stop her and we could talk. All the talking she wanted to do was to call the cops. She said as soon as she could pull herself together, she was calling them. I still say the only thing that stopped her was when I told her she better call them right away so they could get pictures of the damage to her bottom before it faded away.”

“I’d loved to have seen her face when you told her that.”

“I told her they’d have to have the pictures as evidence to show the jury or they’d never be able to charge me. Her face turned white, and she was speechless. She told me if I’d leave and never come back, she wouldn’t report me. I didn’t have the heart to tell her not to worry, I had no intention of returning.”

“I know that had to be scary on your end, but she wouldn’t have called the police, especially once she realized they’d take pictures of her ass. She was upset and embarrassed, and her threat was her way of trying to get back at you.”

“Maybe, but I did learn something from it. I will not give another lady a spanking without having a very direct talk with her about it first, no matter how well I think I’ve gotten to know her or how many times I’ve warned her about her behavior. Never again.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I don’t understand why you don’t think you can go out and meet ladies. Once you meet one you’re interested in getting to know better, sit down and have that talk with her before you get as far into the relationship as you did with Lisa.”

“That’s not really a conversation I look forward to having, especially with a lady I don’t know well,” Ty said with a grin. “I’m telling you, you don’t know how lucky you are.”

“So get on the internet and start going to chat rooms. Then you know how they feel before you actually meet them face to face.”

“And what are my chances of finding someone local? I’d probably find someone on a chat that I thought would be a good match, only to find out she lives on the east coast. Even if she was within a couple hours drive from here, would she be willing to move here? I have no intentions of moving from this ranch, so I’d prefer to find someone local. She’d be more apt to have family or

friends here and want to stay here.”

Wyatt shook his head and threw his hands up as he shrugged his shoulders. “So that’s it? You’re giving up?”

“No, of course not. Like I said, I’d like nothing better than to find a like-minded lady. I know what I’m looking for, though, and if there’s a lady out there I’m meant to find, I feel confident that I’ll find her.”

“How? Are you expecting a single young lady, not real tall, about five feet, six inches or less, who’s intelligent and has a mind of her own, definitely not a doormat, who’s interested in a domestic discipline type of relationship to come waltzing up that lane any day now?”

“She could,” Ty said with a grin.

“She could, but even you have to admit it’s not likely. By the way, I’ve always wondered about your preference for her height. You’re six two. Why are you looking for a lady that much shorter than you?”

“They fit better.” When Ty saw the confused look on Wyatt’s face, he explained further. “They fit over your knee good, and when they’re sitting in your lap afterwards, cuddling, I’ve found that a lady who’s one to four inches over five feet tall fits real well. They can cuddle right in against your chest, and they fit like they were made for that spot.”

Wyatt was outright laughing, but nodded in agreement. “You and I are about the same height. Tara’s five foot four, and I have to say you have a point. She does fit rather well. Are there any other specific qualifications you’re looking for while we’re at it?”

“Nope, I think you pretty well named all the important ones.”

“So now you think you just have to sit back and wait for this single lady of your specified height, with intelligence and a bit of sass, but interested in a domestic discipline relationship to keep that bit of sass under control, to come waltzing into your life, huh?”

Both men laughed, but Ty nodded his head. “She should be here any day now, yes.” After another laugh he added, “And as far as other qualifications, blonde hair, blue eyes would be nice, but I don’t really care if it’s long or short.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re not being too particular,” Wyatt said with another laugh.

Ty eventually sobered and became serious. “I know you think I’m crazy, and I may well be, but I believe that if I’m meant to find a lady, we’ll meet. I don’t know how or when, but I’ve got my eyes open so that when I do, I’ll see her.”

Wyatt shook his head as he stood. “Good luck with that, buddy. I’m going to grab a shower and get going, but I still wish you’d go with us tomorrow night. At least give it some thought, okay?”

“Okay, I’ll give it some thought. Have fun tonight with Tara.” Ty sat on the porch thinking another minute or two before going inside to have dinner before Elsie, his cook and housekeeper, came looking for him.

The next afternoon, Ty and two of his men were repairing fences that had been damaged by the harsher than usual winter they’d had. He’d known they’d have more repairs than usual this year, but once they got out there, the damage was even worse than he anticipated. They were running low on nails and extra boards to replace ones that had been broken by the weather.

“I need to check on Joe and see how he’s doing repairing the backhoe,” Ty told his men. “I’m hoping we’ll have it for tomorrow. You guys go ahead and keep working. I’ll take a four wheeler back and get more supplies and see if Joe needs anything. If he needs a part we don’t have, I’ll send Tucker out with the supplies you need, and I’ll be back out after I get the parts Joe needs.”

The men nodded, and he rode off, headed back to the barn.

On his way, he started thinking about what he and Wyatt had talked about the evening before. He knew Wyatt had his best interests in mind when he kept pushing him to get out on the weekends and meet some ladies. His problem was that going out to eat and have a few drinks just wasn't him. While he didn't have anything against having dinner out and a couple drinks with it, he wasn't keen on the whole concept of having a few drinks for the sole purpose of being social and trying to meet ladies.

He was an old fashioned man with old fashioned ideas, and that plain didn't seem right. He didn't like the thought of a lady getting all dressed up, usually wearing a sexy little dress, and going to a bar or nightclub and drinking, with that one goal in mind; to meet a man. If he had a lady he cared about, he certainly wouldn't want her wearing a sexy little dress and going to a nightclub and drinking, so he couldn't picture meeting his perfect mate while doing something he wouldn't approve of her doing.

The more he thought about it, the more he didn't want to go with Wyatt and Tara this evening. He didn't want to upset Wyatt, but he'd just have to understand.

He got to the barn and got a wagon and hooked it onto his four wheeler. He was loading it full of additional wood and nails, when he saw a car driving up his lane. It didn't look familiar to him, and he wasn't expecting anyone, but he went to meet it. He didn't like the idea of Elsie having to deal with strangers.

Elsie had been his grandfather's cook and housekeeper for years. They'd actually hired her when his grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. The chemotherapy she was taking left her exhausted, and his grandfather hired Elsie to take care of the house so his wife would have one less thing to worry about and could concentrate on getting better. Unfortunately, she never was able to beat the cancer, but she and Elsie became good friends and spent a lot of time together, especially once she'd become bedridden.

Elsie agreed to stay on as his grandfather's cook and housekeeper after his grandmother passed away, and again agreed to stay when Ty inherited the ranch. He was very protective of the people he cared about, especially the ones living on his ranch, and that protective nature led him to the car coming up the lane. Unless it was a friend of Elsie's coming for a visit, he'd rather deal with whoever it was than for them to go to the house, where it would be Elsie's problem to get rid of any salesman or what have you.

He was a little surprised as he approached the car to see it was a lady who pulled up next to the house and was getting out. She was petite, probably just two or three inches over five feet tall, and as she stepped out of the car, she was singing along with the song on the radio, and swaying to the music as she stretched out her back. When the song ended, she reached in and turned the car off. He had to smile. She obviously liked music, and in his experience, people who liked music and would dance to it, generally were happy people who enjoyed life.

She obviously was not aware he was behind her, and he didn't want to startle her, so he opened and closed the door of a pickup truck as he walked past it. She turned toward him when she heard the door close, and smiled at him. He was a little startled when she smiled back at him. He thought back to last night's conversation with Wyatt and almost laughed out loud. Besides being the height he liked his ladies to be, she was also very pretty. She not only had the blonde hair he'd told Wyatt he would prefer, but it was the cutest blonde hair he could remember seeing. It was curly, which seemed to match perfectly with the big smile she had on her face, and her appreciation of music.

"Good afternoon," he said, holding his hand out toward her. "I'm Ty Livingston. Can I

help you with something?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Livingston. I'm Marla Mayfield. It's nice to meet you. This is a beautiful house. Is it yours?"

"It is, and I thank you."

"Let me get right to the reason I stopped. Then if you want to kick me off your property and send me on my way, I'll go peacefully and not take up too much of your time."

Ty chuckled, assuming she must be selling something, but enjoying her approach to her job. It was refreshing. "Sounds fair. Let's go up on the porch to talk a few minutes. This sun's getting a little warm."

"It certainly is. Thank you." He indicated with his hand for her to go ahead, and he followed.

Once on the porch, he pointed to the porch swing and three rocking chairs. "Have a seat." He waited until she was seated in one of the rockers to sit down in one next to her. "Now, what is it you're going to try to sell me today?"

Instead of looking upset, the big smile returned to her face, which he loved seeing. Her whole face seemed to light up when she smiled. "You're a smart man," she said. "I also know you have work to do, so I'll try not to waste your time. Like I said, I'm Marla Mayfield, and I own Perfect Landscaping. I'm going to be upfront and honest with you. I stopped because I remember going past this ranch when I was little, and I remember thinking it was the most beautiful home I'd ever seen. There were roses lining the lane on both sides, and it was just beautiful. Now I notice that not only are they gone, but there are no flowers anywhere around the house at all."

"I agree with you. My grandmother loved roses and loved working with them, and they were beautiful. When she passed away, the roses were neglected. My grandfather had them taken out because it was difficult for him to see them in that state. I inherited the ranch a few years ago, and I've been more concerned about the ranch and getting comfortable running it, than with the appearance of the house."

"I take it your wife isn't into gardening, or doesn't have the time for it?"

"I'm not married."

He was pretty sure he saw a spark of something in her eyes. Interest, perhaps? "So you have a landscaping business. Is this something you and your husband do together, or just you?"

"I'm not married, either," she said with a bit of a smile. "It's all mine. I've always loved gardening of any kind. I love watching things grow and develop into beautiful flowers, or yummy vegetables you can eat."

"As a rancher, I can honestly say I know just how you feel. So, did you come to try to sell me some roses along the lane?"

"If that's what you want. I came to see if you would be interested in any kind of landscaping. I named my company Perfect Landscaping because what I try to do is come up with some kind of landscaping that is perfect for the person I'm putting it in for. Not everyone wants the same thing. Some people want a beautiful flower garden with a variety of colors. Others want all one color. Others want something that will look nice but take very little maintenance. I want to give everyone something that will be perfect for them."

Ty smiled at the pretty little lady and nodded. "I have to say you have my attention. I like your theory, and I'm impressed with what you named your company and why. So, I've never worked with a landscaper. How does this work?"

Her big smile he was already falling in love with returned. "So does that mean you're interested in possibly getting some landscaping done?"

“I’m interested in at least talking about it. Can I get a rough idea as to the cost?”

“Absolutely. What I’d like to do, if you agree, is talk to you about what kinds of things you like and how much you would be willing to invest. Then give me a day or two and I’ll come back with a proposal, including a drawing so you can get an idea how what I’ve proposed would look, and we can go from there. If you like it, fine. If you want to tweak it some way, we can do that. If you decide you don’t like it or we can’t agree on the cost, you owe me nothing. The only thing I ask is if you’re not seriously considering it, tell me before I spend time coming up with an idea or two.”

“Again, I’m impressed. That sounds more than fair. My only concern right now is sitting down to talk about it before you come up with an idea. I’m kind of busy right now. How long will this talk take, or would you be able to come back this evening? I hate to ask you to do that, but I’ll have plenty of time after supper, if you’d be able to return?”

“I understand, and I have an idea. You go finish your work, and I’ll be back this evening. But would you mind if I take maybe ten minutes before I leave to walk around the house? I promise I won’t go inside, but I’d like to see what I might be working with. Then this evening when we talk, I can make a couple quick suggestions.”

“That’d be fine. Why don’t you come back around seven o’clock?”

“Thank you, Mr. Livingston. I appreciate you giving me some time.”