

A Beautiful Ranch

By

Misty Malone

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Chapter One

Dalton Henderson let out a long sigh as he headed over to his sister's house. He loved his sister, Daphne, but she'd invited him—no, insisted he come over for supper, and since it wasn't a holiday and there was no other special reason for the invitation, it could mean only one thing; she wanted something. That was a problem because she very seldom ever asked him for anything, so when she did, he had yet to find a way to say no.

It had been that way for as long as he could remember. They grew up close, even though he was six years older than her. He'd always loved his younger sister and watched out for her. She used to tease him that she felt like she had three parents instead of two.

When their parents died the summer before she started high school, he was named her legal guardian and became even more like a parent. The minute he met Brian Stevens he knew he'd be the perfect husband for his sister. He introduced the two of them and then stepped back and watched as they fell in love. Two years later, he walked her down the aisle when they married.

Brian graduated from college as a certified architect and joined his father's architectural firm. Money was not an issue for them, which was part of the reason Daphne refused to take any of the proceeds from the ranch she and her brother had inherited.

She had lived on the ranch with him until she married, and he'd given her an allowance similar to what their parents had been giving her. He continued to send her the allowance while she was at college, which he'd paid for, and increased the amount when she moved back home and did the cooking for them and took care of the house. He hired a full-time housekeeper and cook when she found a full-time job, which she kept even after she married Brian.

After getting married, she refused to take a cent from the ranch. Dalton insisted she was entitled to it, as the ranch was left to both of them, but she refused, saying he ran the ranch and worked hard all day. She wasn't about to take any money he earned with his hard work. Brian agreed. He was more than able to support his wife even without her salary, which he insisted she put in a savings account in her name.

When they announced their engagement, Dalton placed ten acres located at the corner of the ranch in their names. Daphne had always said that was her favorite part of the ranch because of the creek going through it and the large shade trees all around. She and her friends, or she and Dalton, would often ride their horses to that spot to have a picnic. She and Brian built a nice house on the land, and they both felt that was all they wanted other than to know her brother was close by.

Looking at their house, Dalton had to admit it was a beautiful setting. He rang the doorbell and Brian answered. "Hi, Dalton. Come on in."

"Thanks, Brian." Looking around to be sure Daphne wasn't close by, he spoke rather quietly. "So what's going on?"

"Not sure," Brian answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I'd say she wants something," Dalton said. "You don't know what it might be?"

Brian couldn't hold back a small chuckle. "I'd say you're probably right, Dalton, but I swear I don't know what she's got on her mind. I asked; she insisted she just wanted you to come visit for supper, so I guess we'll find out her real motive together."

Half an hour later, while they were enjoying Daphne's good cooking, the men got their answer. Daphne looked at her brother, then looked down at her food. "Dalton, do you remember Lilly Jamison?"

Dalton, who noticed his sister was avoiding his eyes, thought a moment. "Lilly Jamison? Wasn't she one of your friends from school?"

"Yep. Do you remember which one?"

He gave it more thought, and smiled. "I remember her from a party you had. She's the one who told me to chill when I came in and told all of you that the next girl who climbed out your bedroom window and down the tree was going to sit on the couch in my office for an hour and watch me work."

Brian chuckled as he turned to his wife. "For some reason, I have no trouble believing you and your friends would do such a thing, honey."

She frowned at him. "Ha ha, very funny."

Brian looked at Dalton. "I've got to ask; did anyone else sneak out the window and down the tree?"

Dalton had a big smile on his face as he replayed that day in his mind. "Yep. Lilly, the one who told me to chill. She was appalled when she found out I was serious."

"Did she make it through the whole hour?"

"Sort of, but I let her off easy," Dalton confessed. "She kept arguing with me. Every time she'd argue I'd start her hour over, until finally, she fell asleep on my couch. I woke her up an hour later."

Brian laughed again. "I can't believe you let her off that easy, Dalton."

"The way she was going, we would have been there until midnight. She just could not stop arguing with me. And Daphne would have been very upset with me if I had ruined her party by keeping one of the trouble makers down there that long." He looked back to his sister. "So to answer your question, yes, I do remember Lilly Jamison. Why?"

Daphne paled a little. "That wasn't exactly the memory I was hoping you'd have."

Dalton pinned his sister with his gaze. "Why? What does she need?"

"You don't have to look so suspicious; it's not really that bad. You have this scary look on your face."

"I knew when I came here that you wanted something, and now I know it involves Lilly. What does Lilly need?"

"A place to stay for a little while."

"And why are you asking me? You have some extra bedrooms. I'm sure she'd be happier here."

"You don't understand. She needs a special place, and the ranch would be perfect."

"Perfect for what?"

"She's an artist. She paints and she's been in a slump. She mostly paints scenery. Lilly always thought it was beautiful around here, and there are tons of places on the ranch that are so pretty. I know it would be the inspiration she needs. Please, Dalton, can she stay with you for a little while and see if the change of scenery, pun intended, helps?"

"I still don't see why she can't stay here with you. You're on part of the same ranch."

"Think about it, Dalton. Beyond the ten acres our house is on, we have pastures with ravines and big flat fields. But there are so many pretty spots around your house that she wouldn't have to worry about going too far off and getting lost. There's the pond, the woods, and that meadow where you have the colts, just to name a few."

Dalton knew she was right, but he wasn't about to give in so easily. "Daphne, I have a ranch to run."

"She's not fifteen any more. She's an adult now, and all she needs is a place to stay so she can go out and paint."

"You make it sound like I'll never see her, and you know that's not true. But more importantly, you know me. If she's staying there, I'm responsible for her." When he began to shake his head, his little sister played her trump card.

"Please? I don't ask for much when it comes to the ranch, but I am asking now. Can she please stay on my half of the ranch?"

"Daphne!" Brian's tone of voice told them all how he felt. "Your brother said no."

Dalton sighed. "No, Brian, she's right. The ranch is half hers, and she's never asked for a thing."

He turned to face his sister. "Of course she can stay at the ranch. But there are rules I'll have to insist she follow. I think it would be a good idea if you told her that before she gets here so there are no surprises."

"What kind of rules?"

"I'm sure the rules will change as we go along and I see what kind of things she's doing, and how experienced she is around a ranch. For starters, if she's alone I'll want her to be within eyesight of the house, at least until she gets to know her way around. I don't want her getting lost or running into wild animals she won't know how to deal with. I'll also expect her to be home at mealtimes and bedtime unless she tells me ahead of time."

"Dalton, she's not fifteen, remember?"

"I know that, but if she's living under my roof, I want to know she's okay. I'm not asking her to tell me where she's going, like I did when you were living at home and underage, but simply let me know she'll be out so I don't worry."

"I don't think she's going to like that."

"Then she better look for another place to paint. Those are my rules, Daphne. You know me; you know I have to be sure she's safe."

Brian put his hand over his wife's. "Sweetheart, I think your brother's being very fair, and if you think about it, you should feel that way, too. If she's free to roam anywhere she wants on the ranch and doesn't have to check in, what would happen if she wandered off and got lost in

one of the woods. You know what kinds of animals she could encounter. Would she know what to do if she encountered a coyote? How about a feral pig or a mountain lion?"

Daphne looked from Brian to Dalton, and quickly gave in. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I guess she didn't grow up on the ranch like I did. Okay, I'll talk to her."

"Thank you," Dalton said. "She can stay as long as she needs to provided she'll follow my rules."

Two weeks later Lilly Jamison followed Daphne up the lane to The Standing Elm. Dalton came out of the house to greet them. He kissed his sister on the cheek and took the two suitcases Daphne had in her hands. "It's nice to see you again, Lillian. Welcome to The Standing Elm."

"Thank you, Dalton. I appreciate you letting me stay here."

Never one to avoid touchy subjects, Dalton nodded. "No problem, as long as you understand I have rules on this ranch and anyone staying here has to follow them."

"I understand," she assured him.

"Good. We'll go over what those are later. Right now let's get you settled in. Daphne tells me you're a famous artist now and you live on the east coast?"

"I don't know about the famous part, but I do paint, mostly scenery, and yes, I do live along the coast in South Carolina."

"It's quite a drive from South Carolina to Wyoming. Did you drive it yourself?"

"Yes, but I stopped at motels at night. I didn't really push it."

"Good," Dalton said as he put her two suitcases on the bed in the room that used to be Daphne's. I'll let Daphne show you around. I'm going back out to help the men break a couple yearlings, but Daphne can tell you anything you need to know. Supper's at 6:00 and we'll go over the rules and talk then." He turned and left, leaving Lilly staring at his retreating back.

"He hasn't changed a whole lot, has he?" she asked Daphne once she'd heard the front door close.

Daphne laughed. "I don't think Dalton has ever changed, and I doubt that he ever will. What specifically were you meaning, though?"

"He's always so—I don't know. He seems very warm and friendly, but at the same time he's always down to business. How can he do that; be both at the same time?"

Daphne considered her friend's words a moment. "You know, I never thought about it before, but you're right. He is very warm and friendly, but he has a very serious side to him, as well. When he said he'd go over the rules with you, pay attention to them because they involve safety, and that's one thing he's very serious about."

"Okay, will do," Lilly agreed quickly. "I'm so excited to be here. This is such a beautiful ranch. I just know I'll get back on track while I'm here."

"I hope so. Let's get you unpacked while we talk," Daphne suggested. "So what got you off track?"

"It's kind of a long story," Lilly said, but reluctantly told her friend about the man she'd been seeing for six months. "He traveled a lot for business, and I decided to surprise him when he was going to be gone over his birthday. I called his secretary to find out what motel he was staying at. I got the room number from the desk clerk. I knocked on the door, but a lady answered. When I asked who she was, the lady smiled and said she was his wife as of the previous night."

"Oh, Lilly, how awful." Daphne couldn't imagine such a thing, and felt sorry for her friend.

"It was such a shock I just haven't been able to get back to my painting. I think all I need is a change of scenery and I'll be okay again. Remember that pond that we used to swim in? I always thought that was so pretty. There were wild flowers in the spring, and when the leaves on the trees all turned colors in the fall, it was gorgeous. Oh, and that creek with the weeping willows shading it where all the deer go to drink; that was lovely."

"There are some really pretty places here. I hope this works for you." After helping her store her now empty suitcases in the closet, Daphne said, "Brian and I have a dinner we have to go to tonight and I have to get going so I'm ready on time, but call me tomorrow and we'll talk more as I show you around. We'll go see all those spots you mentioned, and more."

"I can't wait. Thanks, Daphne."

Dalton came in for supper and was surprised to find Lilly in the kitchen helping his cook, Stella. The two of them were talking and laughing like they were old friends and he had to smile. "I take it you two have met?"

Stella turned toward him and smiled. "Miss Daphne introduced us before she left."

"Good," Dalton said. "I'm going upstairs to clean up before supper."

"Okay," Stella agreed. "I can have it on the table in fifteen minutes, or should I hold it longer?"

"No, that will be fine. Thank you," Dalton said as he disappeared up the steps to his bedroom.

Daphne went back to her conversation with Stella, until another handsome cowboy came through the kitchen door. "Evening, Stella," he said, as he took his hat off and hung it on a hook by the door. He looked up, and stopped short when he saw Daphne.

"Clay, this is Miss Lilly Jamison, a friend of Miss Daphne's." She turned to tell Lilly, "This is Clay Humphries, Dalton's ranch foreman."

Dalton came back into the kitchen just in time to see the sparkle in Clay's eyes as he very sincerely said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Daphne. If you have any questions about the ranch, feel free to ask me."

"Why, thank you, Clay. I'll remember that," she said with what Dalton thought was a bit of a flirty smile. Judging by the big grin on his face, apparently Clay did as well. Dalton was startled and rather confused when he realized that somehow bothered him.

"I see you two have already met," Dalton said, drawing their attention to him and away from each other. "As my foreman, Clay eats meals in here with me so we can talk about the ranch and what needs to be done. We'll try to keep shop talk to a minimum while you're here so we don't bore you to death, Lilly."

"Actually, ranches have always fascinated me. I'd love to hear what all you're doing. And please don't feel you have to do anything different just because I'm here," Lilly insisted. "You probably won't even know I'm around."

"Oh, I'll know," Dalton said with a chuckle. "As long as you're here, I'll feel responsible for you, and I take my responsibilities seriously. We'll go over the rules while we eat." Turning to Stella, he asked, "Are we ready, Stella?"

"Most certainly, Dalton. You three go on in and be seated, and I'll be right in."

"Thank you, Stella," Dalton said as he casually led a surprised Lilly into the dining room with a gentle hand on her back. He pulled the chair out and seated her before sitting next to her, at the end of the table. Clay sat across from her, and before she had a chance to consider the odd sensation that went through her as Dalton's hand came into contact with her arm, Stella was

setting bowls of food on the table in front of them. The food all looked fantastic, and she felt a bit overwhelmed.

She recovered as she heard Dalton speaking. "Help yourself, Daphne. We're pretty informal around here." He passed her a bowl of mashed potatoes as he said, "I put a piece of Swiss steak on your plate, but help yourself to more."

She paused a moment to consider whether she appreciated him assuming she wanted Swiss steak, but quickly put the thought on the back burner to listen to the two handsome cowboys as they discussed their day on the ranch.

"Did you and the men get the fence fixed in the northwest corner today, Clay?"

"Yep, we fixed the one place it was down, and then we rode the entire fence to be sure it was all okay. There were a couple small places we repaired, but there was really just the one spot that was a real problem. It should be good to go now."

"Good," Dalton said. "We'll transfer the main herd tomorrow into that pasture. They've gotten the one they're in now pretty well eaten down." Clay nodded his head in agreement.

They continued to eat a few minutes before Clay asked, "Have you heard anything yet about your offer to buy the bull?"

"Not yet," Dalton said, "but I'm glad you said something. I want to call him tonight and see if he's made a decision yet. If he's not going to sell his bull, I want to start looking around for another one. I definitely think we need to introduce a new blood line. There's a man out east of Cheyenne that I've heard a lot of good things about. They say he's been working for several years now on his breeding program and has some nice looking stock."

"That sounds like it's worth looking into, anyway," Clay agreed.

Dalton looked at Lilly. "We need to go over your rules, Lilly, but before we do that, you haven't touched your food. I guess I should have asked sooner, but are you a vegetarian, or do you have any food allergies?"

"No, I'm not a vegetarian, and I don't have any food allergies."

Dalton's eyebrows rose as he looked down at her plate. "Is there some problem with your food?"

Lilly looked down at her untouched plate and felt her face redden, though she wasn't sure why. "No, everything looks delicious. I was listening to you two talk and I guess I was a bit mesmerized. I've always thought ranches had a rather mystic air about them."

Dalton and Clay looked at each other as they asked in unison, "Mystic?"

Feeling her face flush even more, Lilly said, "Okay, maybe not mystic. Maybe more magical." When she saw the blank look on both men's faces she quickly said, "Okay, maybe not magical, either. I've just always been intrigued by ranches and how they are run."

Clay gave her an indulgent smile. "I take it you've never spent time on a ranch?"

"Only when I'd come here to visit Daphne for a weekend. I always loved it."

"Which is why we're going to go over some rules you'll need to follow," Dalton interjected. "This is as good a time as any. For the time being I don't want you wandering too far from the house alone. Make sure you can always see the house from wherever you are."

"What? Dalton, I'm an adult."

"I can easily see that, Lilly," he answered with a grin. "But a ranch is not a good place to be roaming around, possibly lost. It's easy to get turned around and head away from the house when you think you're coming back here. There are some wild animals out there you don't want to run into alone without a gun."

"Okay, I hadn't thought of wild animals. Do I need to get a gun to take with me when I go out to paint?"

"That depends," Dalton answered. "Do you know how to use one?"

"I haven't before, but how hard can it be? I'm a quick learner with most things."

"Then to answer your question, no, you shouldn't go get a gun to take with you."

She looked confused. "But why not, if there are wild animals I need to watch out for?"

Dalton looked at her and shook his head. "Lilly, I will not have someone on my ranch with a gun unless I'm sure they know how to use it. If you stay for a little while, I'll teach you to use a gun if you want, and then we can talk again if you want to take one with you. But for now, no, absolutely not. I don't want to have to worry about anyone getting shot accidentally."

"But then how will I see all the gorgeous scenery?"

Dalton saw Clay smile and quickly cut off his response. "Let me ask you; how exactly do you do your painting? Do you take your canvas out with you and paint directly onto it?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I see an area that I know would be gorgeous on canvas, and I'll take out my phone or a camera and take a bunch of pictures to memorialize it. Then as soon as I get home, I'll start the painting while it's fresh in my mind. Usually I at least start it when I'm there, looking at it. Why?"

Lilly could tell Dalton was thinking through what she'd said, and waited patiently for his reply. Finally, he offered, "We'll work it out. I'm thinking I can take you around the ranch when I have a little free time. If you see a spot you like, you can take some pictures, and then we can go back with your supplies when we have a little time, like maybe on a Sunday."

"I don't want to inconvenience you. You shouldn't have to spend your free time taking me places."

"I'd be happy to take you out sometimes, Lilly," Clay offered.

"We'll see how it goes and make decisions on it as we go along," Dalton quickly decided. "For now, let me go over the rules you're to follow while you stay here."

Lilly frowned a bit, but said, "Okay."

Dalton had to concentrate on not chuckling when he saw her frown. The Lilly he remembered growing up as Daphne's friend certainly wouldn't have wanted to hear about any rules either. He was guessing she hadn't changed all that much. He put that thought aside for the moment and started speaking, watching her expression. "Okay, we've talked about the first one. When you're alone, I want you to always be able to see the house from where you are. I know you're not happy with that, but I think you'll find once you go out and start exploring, that gives you more leeway than it sounds. The house is on a knoll, so you can see it from quite a distance."

Lilly nodded and reluctantly agreed. "Okay. I'll see how that goes before I complain. You're right; it may let me wander further than I'm thinking."

He chuckled as he said, "That's a good idea. See what you're talking about before you complain about it."

Lilly totally missed the subtle point he was trying to make. "Yeah, I guess. Anything else?"

He hesitated a moment. "Lilly, let me explain why I'm making these rules. If you understand why I'm doing the things I'm doing, maybe they won't seem as restrictive. This is my ranch, and I'm responsible for the safety of everyone and everything on it. If you ask my ranch hands, they'll tell you I have rules and I expect them to be followed. They know if they don't, they'll be fired. In your case, you're welcome to stay here as long as you like; as long as you follow the rules. They're for safety reasons; for the safety of not only you, but my ranch hands, as well."

"I don't understand. How could I do something to hurt them?"

"A ranch is like a well-oiled machine. It runs smoothly as long as everything, or everyone, is doing their job. Think of a ranch as a wheel. There are many spokes on that wheel. None of them are extraordinarily strong on its own, but together they support the wheel. If one spoke breaks, it puts extra pressure on the others, and soon one of them breaks. See where I'm going?"

"So far, yeah."

"Well, there are lots of things that need to be done on a ranch, and as long as everyone does their job, and does it well, everything works together and runs smoothly. Now, keep that idea in mind as I explain these next two rules. First, don't bother my ranch hands. Each one of them has a job to do. If you start asking them questions or asking them to do something for you or take you someplace, it may not seem like much, but it takes them away from what they're doing. If they fall behind and their job doesn't get done..."

"Their spoke's going to break," Lilly finished.

"Exactly. So the men are busy. Let them do their work."

"Okay, that makes sense. What else?"

"We need to talk about fences and gates. Gates are to remain closed. If you want to pass through a pasture that's empty, I'm okay with that, but climb over the gate; don't open it."

"Okay, but why?"

"If you open a gate you might forget to close it, or not get it closed quite right. Either way, the cattle can get out, and that's a serious problem. Depending on where it is, it might go unnoticed for a period of time and the cattle can scatter pretty quickly. Then it takes all the hands and a lot of time to round them up and get them back in. They can get hurt while they're out and running. Or they can go onto a road and get hit. Then the ranch is held responsible."

"Okay, I get it. If you open a gate, be sure you close it right," Lilly said.

"Is that the rule I just gave you, young lady?" Dalton's casual voice had suddenly turned into a very stern, authoritative voice, and he didn't sound happy. It startled Lilly, and she quickly glanced up and saw a stern expression on his face. More than a little riled, she shook her head.

"I'd like an answer, Lilly."

"No," she squeaked out. She didn't know why his tone upset her so much, but she couldn't help it. He was suddenly very intimidating.