



The smell of bacon and eggs jarred Lily awake. Before opening her eyes, she reached over to the other side of the bed and groaned. Empty. No Harvey. But she'd slept last night. Here. In her and Harvey's bed. Only God knew how.

But the good Lord knew how she'd handle everything else that plagued her. She had no idea where she'd live. How she'd manage to survive, wherever that might be.

Francisca and Ella's voices drifted in from the kitchen. Her daughter sounded calm at the moment, but she needed to be with her, just in case. She still wasn't sure how much a not-quite-four-year-old girl understood about losing her pa.

"*Buenas días.*" Francisca turned and grinned the instant Lily stepped into the kitchen.

Ella echoed her own version of Francisca's greeting.

"Good morning to both of you." Lily scooped Ella into her arms.

Looking past her mother, the little girl's body stiffened. "Where's Pa?"

"Oh, *meine Liebchen* ..." Lily's hand paused in midair from stroking Ella's brown curls, not yet tamed into her usual braids.

Her daughter looked even more confused at her mother's use of the strange German phrase. Distress had undone the vow she'd made years ago to never utter another word in that language.

"Pa's in heaven with God now, darling." She forced herself to smile into Ella's eyes. "He's fine ...". Her voice cracked. She took a deep breath. "And we'll both be all right. God will take care of us."

Ella's wide-eyed stare said she didn't understand, but at least no tears dampened her cheeks.

"*Sí*, God take care of everyone." Before returning her attention to breakfast, Francisca swiped at her eyes with a corner of her apron. "Is almost ready. You and *tu chiquita* eat while hot." She motioned for them to sit.

Lily settled Ella into the chair next to her. Glancing at Harvey's empty spot at the other end of the small table, she swallowed the lump in her throat. Francisca set a plate brimming with eggs, bacon, and a buttered biscuit in front of her and a one with child-size portions in front of Ella.

"Thank you." She squeezed Francisca's hand.

Francisca patted her shoulder. "Is what *amigas* do."

"And you're such a dear friend."

"*Gracias*." She turned back to the stove to get her own food.

After Francisca seated herself, she bowed her head. "Dear God, give peace and strength for my Lily." She finished her prayer in Spanish, her voice full of emotion. Having lost her first husband in a stampede, the woman understood Lily's pain better than any of her other friends.

After finishing the blessing, she squeezed Lily's hand. "I take care of *Señor* Grimes today."

"I'd appreciate that."

Francisca nodded.

Nothing else needed to be said about tending to the unpredictable man's needs. Lily sincerely doubted the kind person he'd been yesterday would reappear this morning.

WHILE TOBY WAS FIXING to lather his face and shave, a knock sounded on the front door. He swiped at his damp chin with a towel before heading to answer a second insistent knock. Mrs. Johnson usually knocked once then waited for him to come let her in.

He opened the door to see Francisca on his porch. "Is Mrs. Johnson all right?"

"Sí. I tell her rest. I take care of her and you today."

"All right. I'm sure that's for the best."

"Lily tell me where everything is in kitchen. I fix your breakfast then see to your house."

"Thanks."

He shaved while Francisca cooked. If not for the sounds of the frying pan and coffee pot clunking onto the stove, he wouldn't know anyone was in the kitchen. Lily.. Mrs. Johnson ... usually hummed or sang softly. Whenever he was home, he could track her from anywhere in the house by listening for her as she cleaned or whatever she was doing.

Three nights of not sleeping were catching up with him. He shook his head at his reflection in the washstand mirror. Nothing else made sense about why he wished for the sound of his housekeeper's voice. Especially not as hard as he usually worked to stay away from anyone other than Harvey and his little family.

"Breakfast is ready."

Francisca's words startled him from his thoughts. In his hurry to finish what he should already be done with, the razor almost nicked his chin. His lack of sleep slowed him down as well as played tricks on his mind.

His substitute cook silently bustled about the kitchen as he ate. Never thought he'd miss his regular housekeeper's attempts to talk to him every morning. After Francisca poured his second

cup of coffee, he placed his hand on her arm to keep her from walking away.

“I plan to fix a couple of stalls in the barn and maybe start breaking a horse if the weather warms up later. So I’ll be close by if Mrs. Johnson needs anything.”

“*Sí, señor.* I tell her.”

“She really is all right, isn’t she?”

“She will be. Will take time.”

“Promise you’ll let me know if she’s not.” Her for-certain tone didn’t make him feel as sure as she looked or sounded.

Francisca’s raised brows told him he’d surprised her or she doubted his sympathy. Maybe both. In spite of his selfish motives for wanting to keep Mrs. Johnson working here, he sincerely wanted her to be all right.

“Harvey’s dead because he was working for me. I owe it to him to take care of his wife. Tell me how she’s really doing.”

“Lily is strong. Strong in faith. Strong in God. She will be all right.”

He nodded before swallowing his words of argument along with the last of his coffee. Since he hadn’t been on speaking terms with God for years, he had no delusions about God helping anyone with anything. Especially him.

“Uh, good breakfast. I appreciate all your help.” He scooted his chair back, rather than give Francisca a chance to start preaching to him. “Like I said, I’ll be close by if Mrs. Johnson needs any help.”

“*Sí, señor.*” Francisca still looked doubtful.

Toby spent the morning wrestling with stubborn boards and even more stubborn thoughts. He’d never supposed he’d miss the calm words Harvey always had when things weren’t going right. But he did.

Eating lunch alone instead of with Harvey, Lily and Ella made him look forward to going out to the corral and dealing with an unbroken mustang. He missed Ella’s little girl jabbering and Lily’s—Mrs. Johnson’s—serene smiles.

Concentrating on staying in his saddle while a horse tried to unseat him should be a good way to keep him from thinking about what he missed. Things that had irritated him so much some days that he'd wished for the maddening solitude he now had.

After the feisty bay threw him for the third time, Toby gave up on breaking any horse for today. Maybe he'd be tired enough to sleep tonight. If not, he'd have worse problems soon.

He glanced up at the sun as he walked back to the house. Somewhere around two o'clock. He'd know the exact time if he hadn't forgotten to put his watch in his waistcoat pocket. He'd wash up and try to relax a while. Maybe that would clear his muddled mind.

Inside his too-quiet house, his wayward thoughts returned to Mrs. Johnson before he finished cleaning up. She couldn't be as strong as Francisca thought. Harvey had watched over his wife as if she were as delicate as Ma's fragile china. China he'd been happy to give to Charlotte when she married David.

But he couldn't, wouldn't discard Mrs. Johnson like that. He owed Harvey. Plus, he needed to keep the only person left who'd never bothered him. Never plagued him with questions about why he did what he did. Never tried to tell him what he was doing was wrong.

After combing his hair and putting on clean clothes, his boots went of their own accord toward the foreman's house. Maybe seeing for himself how Mrs. Johnson fared would set his mind at ease. Something had to.

Relief washed through him when she answered his knock on her door. "Uh, I came to see how you're doing." He removed his hat.

"Thank you."

He glanced behind her as she ushered him inside. Francisca sang to Ella as she rocked her. "I'd like to talk to you."

"Ella just went to sleep. Do you mind talking on the porch?"

"No." *Not one bit.* He'd rather talk to her alone. Such crazy

thoughts. He was getting worse by the minute. He had to figure out a way to get some sleep.

“Let me get my shawl.” She grabbed her wrap from a hook near the door and followed him outside. “What do you want, Mr. Grimes?”

“I-uh-came to see about you. If you want anything.” Except for the husband he couldn’t return to her. Maybe she wouldn’t mention that.

She shook her head. “Francisca is taking very good care of Ella and me.”

“Did she tell you to be sure and let me know if you do need something?”

Her eyes widened as she nodded. He might ought to start working on his reputation if no one believed he could want to help someone in need, especially a good woman like Lily Johnson.

“I meant it. And I’d like for you to stay on as housekeeper here.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. She blinked them away. “Oh, Mr. Grimes. Thank you.” Her voice quivered. “I ... haven’t thought about that yet. Please. I need to pray about it first, but you could be my answer to prayer before I ask.”

Choking back caustic words about how useless praying was, he shook his head. The surly things he usually said to anyone preaching to him about God kept people away just as he liked. But he didn’t want this woman backing away from him.

Why, he wasn’t sure. Must be not enough sleep combined with his guilt over her husband’s death. Plus he *did* need her to stay. She’d let him be the way she’d been doing the last two years. A new housekeeper might not ...

A pair of misty eyes staring up at him reined in his wandering thoughts. “So you’ll think about my offer?”

“Definitely.” Her lips almost turned up in a weak smile.

He couldn’t stop himself from smiling back at her. Seeing just

a hopeful gleam in her eyes made him feel better. He'd take as good of care of Harvey's widow as he could.

How that might look to anyone else didn't bother him.