

Anywhere But There

By Marcella Simmons

Before leaving Albuquerque that evening, Debbie and the boys stopped to buy a few groceries, supplies, a TV and DVD player, several new movies for the boys and three thick sleeping bags and three pillows, two night lights for the boys rooms and a few odds and ends to get them by for a few days until they could buy new furniture for their new house. She had also purchased a coffee maker and necessary supplies for it. They returned to their new home on the mountain. Later that evening Randy stopped by to see how they were doing.

"Thank you for having the house cleaned for us - it is perfect."

"You're most welcome. Hey, Liz is coming out with the kids for a while - she is bringing pizza. Would you like to come over and eat with us in a little while?"

"We'd like that. You sure she wouldn't mind?"

"Of course she wouldn't - she really likes you and the boys, Debbie."

That evening after dinner, Randy followed her back up to the house. "Are you sure you don't mind staying here tonight? You're more than welcome to sleep at the house. The security company is supposed to come out tomorrow and hook up your alarm system. Keep your cell phone close by and turned on in case you need to call me."

"We'll be fine," she insisted. He left after saying goodnight to the boys. He looked as if he was about to say something to her but changed his mind and walked out to the jeep, and drove away.

As night approached, she took a shower while the boys watched cartoons. After the boys had their bath and were in bed asleep, she lay down beside them on her sleeping bag and thought about the past week. It was quiet - too quiet - no sounds of the city could be heard. No horns or squealing tires - no sirens. Just quietness.

Her cell phone rang - it was Randy. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"I'm glad you called. How do you deal with the quiet here?" she asked.

"It takes getting used to, especially after living in the city. Are you okay? I can come over if you like. I do have a sleeping bag, you know."

"Are you sure you wouldn't mind?"

"My pleasure. We can camp out tonight in your new home and talk for awhile. We still have some champagne left over - would you like me to bring it?"

"Sure, that would be nice."

Debbie listened for Randy and when he arrived, she quietly let him in the door.

They lay on the floor next to each other talking for hours. Debbie talked about her life and how things never seemed to work out. Randy talked about how his wife had taken the girls and left - leaving him alone and bitter. "I worked long hours and she couldn't be married to a rancher - she told me that more than once. I ran my father's real estate business but I had a ranch to take care of too and the long hours was more than she could handle. I sold most of my cattle and most of my land so I'd have more time to spend with my girls when they come here. This place was my daddy's old place. I don't think I told you that."

"No, you didn't tell me that. Why on earth did you sell it? Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, puzzled that he never told her.

"I wasn't sure that you'd buy it," was his response. "A couple of months ago, I had it totally remodeled inside and out. I've had it on the market for some time now but no one was interested. I'm glad that you came along, Debbie. It's perfect for you and the boys. From what I can see already, they love it here."

"I know. This is the perfect place for us. You have good taste in remodeling."

"Actually, Liz helped. The place was getting run down and I couldn't keep it up and work all the time. Keeping a two hundred acre ranch up is hard enough, as well as working in an office all day. I plan on working a few more years before I retire. Liz helps me at the office part time. I've been meaning to ask you if you have a job yet? Liz is ready to quit - she works part time but I really need someone 5 days a week from 9:00 until 2:30 every day. Would you like to take her place as receptionist? We were talking earlier and she said she'd be more than happy to look after Samuel every day."

"I'd like that," she answered. "I wouldn't be able to start for at least another couple of weeks. I need to get settled in here and shop for furniture and stuff. When school starts, it would be perfect."

"The job is yours if you want it. I pay \$9.50 an hour - not much but it is a small company."

"That's better than what I am making now," she admitted. "I'll take the job."

He turned over on his side facing her. She could see his shining eyes in the moon lit room. He reached over and touched her cheek. "Good night, Debbie from Texas."

"Goodnight," she whispered, almost breathless from his sensual touch.

The sun was shining brightly through un-curtained windows throughout the house - Debbie opened

her eyes, looking around the room. The boys were stirring. Randy had apparently left earlier that morning; there was no sign that he had been there. Debbie was aware of a growing attraction between her and the man who sold her this house. Last night as he lay next to her, she wanted to reach out and hold him, but she was afraid of setting herself up for more heartache so she refrained from responding to his gentle touch on her cheek.

She looked at her watch. Nine thirty. She got the boys up, fixed them a bowl of cereal, using a box for a table. "We need to tidy everything up. The security company is coming today to put in our system that will keep us safe. Once they get here, we'll go into town and buy some furniture. When you're done eating, we'll go outside and check out the yard!"

After she made coffee in her new coffee maker, she opened the back door and walked outside on the porch. Looking out over the mountain was a sight she would never forget - it seemed to go on for miles. The stretch of countryside connected with other mountains but the layout was endless - she could see dots of little houses here and there and a lake as blue as the sky. "Randy knew I'd love this place," she whispered. The morning air was briskly cool but tolerable.

"This is the first day of the rest of our lives," Debbie said aloud as she looked out over the mountain, pleased beyond words with her purchase.

The boys came out and the three of them walked around for a while looking at the expanse of yard all around the house. "Mom, this is perfect," Cody said. "Can we build a tree house over there?" he asked, pointing a tree that grew alone in the corner of the back yard.

"That's a perfect place for a tree house," she said. "We'll see. When we go into town today, we'll pick up some supplies and see about getting some lumber for a tree house delivered. I've never built a tree house before but we can try." She hugged Cody to her, and reached and scooped Samuel up in her arms. "You two boys will have a perfect home here," she promised.

Her cell phone rang - it was the security company. They were at the gate and wanted to know if they could come in. She and the boys continued to explore after she showed them the house. "Would you like the fence to be secured as well?" the man in charge asked.

"That would be fine," she smiled.

"We should it all done in a little while," the technician said. "Then I'll show you how to put your code in and make everything work - it's pretty simple."

"Okay." Debbie and the boys continued on their quest to inspect the property. Out back, beyond the fence about a hundred yards or so was a gate that led to a barn, a few smaller sheds and a stream that ran

down the hill into a larger stream. Upon further inspection, she saw that the stream started at a fresh water spring not far from one of the sheds.

"Look, boys - you can never go near this spring unless I am with you. It is very deep," she cautioned.

"Okay, Mommy," Cody promised.

They inspected the sheds and found a large piece of plywood leaning against a wall. "Look Cody, here's something we can use to build your tree house. We'll leave it here until we're ready to start building."

They walked back up to the house.

"Ma'am we're all done. Choose some numbers that you can remember that no one knows but you for your security code. I wouldn't suggest using addresses, birthdays or anything like that - too many people could figure that out. You'll need a set of six numbers and a password."

Instantly, Debbie knew what numbers she would pick. She keyed in *950000* and typed in *JimmyPeters* as her password. No one knew about that name except her. She knew that had it not been for Jimmy Peters leaving her that large amount of money that she wouldn't own any of this property to begin with.

After the technician and his crew departed, she and the boys drove into Meadow Lake.

The town square was only a block long, with a variety of stores around the outside of the square; the large courthouse built like a giant castle nestled in the center. The street that went around the square was one way all the way around but with streets spawning off to each side that one could go a different direction if needed. She looked at each of the stores - a dollar store, hair salon, a barber shop, a bank, a couple of antique stores, and at the very end was a small hardware store. They parked out front and was greeted by a couple of very old men sitting on a bench in front of the store. "How do, Ma'am?" one of the men asked, puffing on his pipe. "You have a couple of real nice looking boys there."

"We're fine. Thank you," she said and they walked in.

She as greeted by a friendly looking lady who looked to be in her mid-sixties. there wasn't a hair out of place on her beauty shop died red hair. "Hello. What can we do for you?" she asked.

"Is there a furniture store in town?" Debbie asked.

"Go to the end of the block, turn right. Fred's Furniture and Appliance is at the end of the street. Are you new in town?" the lady asked. "I'm Janet - Janet Crabtree. Do come in and browse in our store - see anything you like, we do deliver."

"Okay, we will..."

"Where you from, Honey? Are you living in Meadow Lake?"

"Yes ma'am, about two miles south of town. We bought a place on the mountain."

"I'll bet you bought the old Snyder place. How is Randy Snyder, by the way? I haven't seen him much since that wife of his drove out of town with that millionaire from California, or was it Las Vegas? It shook the whole town - Randy's a real good man."

"I bought the Snyder place that belonged to Randy's father. He's doing good. I was wondering if I could buy a hammer and nails. We're going to build a tree house."

"Are you now?" Janet Crabtree directed the question at Cody. "How old are you, Little Man?"

"I'm five," he said, holding up five fingers.

"You will be starting school this year, then?"

"That's another thing - when does school start here, Mrs. Crabtree? I know in Texas schools start around the first week in September. Where is the school here?" Debbie asked.

"I think it starts back in about two weeks. The elementary school is north of town about half a mile. Here's the number if you need it." Janet Crabtree wrote the number on a piece of paper and handed it to her. "You might need to pre-register your little boy since he is new here. Call them when you get a chance."

Janet Crabtree walked down an aisle and brought a hammer back with her. She walked over to a rack that had all sorts of sizes of nails. "What size nails do you need, Honey?" she asked.

"I have no idea - I've never built a tree house before," Debbie laughed.

"You're probably going to need some pretty large nails. I'll put a pound in the sack - if you need more just come back in. Anything else I can get for you?" she asked, ringing up the items.

"I can't think of anything else - there is some lumber in the shed at the back of the house. Like you said, we can come back in if we need anything else."

"Your total is eight dollars and thirty-nine cents."

Debbie and the two boys walked out to the sidewalk. "Let's go down to the dollar store and see if we can find a toy for each of you."

They chose several toy tractors and little cars. Debbie saw a stack of plastic sand boxes propped by the wall on her way in. She chose one of those for Samuel. As they walked around, she saw an inexpensive swimming pool that would be perfect for them at the moment - she picked out two pair of arm floaties, goggles, a couple of swim rings and beach balls and some other pool toys for them to have fun with. She also chose six folding lawn chairs for children and four folding lawn chairs for adults to put on her front porch. She also chose two ceramic planters with a floral design that would match the off white paint on

her front porch. "I hope you have a water hose, Ma'am," the cashier said.

"Drats! I don't. Where are they and I will get one now."

"Isle two."

As the morning wore on, they drove down to the furniture store and selected enough furniture for the entire house. She drove back around to the antique store on the square where she saw a set of china in the window with a yellow rose pattern that would look lovely in her new china cabinet. They got out and she made her purchases. She came out with two quilts designed and sewn by a lady in town named Mava Belle Gibb. "Miss Gibb is eighty-four years old, and is still quilting," said the lady owner of the shop. "She'll be pleased that you bought her quilts today. Her hearing is about gone but she has the eyesight of an eagle."

She unloaded the rest of her purchases in the front seat of her car since the boys toys were protruding out the trunk, held down by a couple of rubber cords she had purchased at the hardware store.

Samuel was about to fall asleep in the car. "Don't go to sleep yet, Baby," she said. "Let's stop and get some fries and chicken nuggets, and then we'll go home."

Later that day, after the boys had a nap, she let them go outside to play in their sandbox. The pool had to be inflated so she took her air pump from the car and plugged it into the cigarette lighter until the pool was full of air. She sat two of the lawn chairs in the yard for the boys and placed the rest on the porch in a corner still unfolded. She plugged the water hose up to the faucet on the outset wall and filled the wading pool knee deep. She sat on the porch drinking iced tea while the boys enjoyed the rest of the evening playing. She watched Cody play. He was laughing again, something he hadn't done in a while.

They played for hours. Her cell phone rang - it was Randy calling.

"I'm at the gate. Would you like to drive down and let me in and reset the alarm?"

"I'll be there in a minute. Come on boys - slip on your flip flops and let's ride down to the gate and let Randy in." Debbie scribbled the code and password on a napkin and once he came through she handed it to him. "Just be sure you lock it back before you leave."

As he got out of the jeep, he was looking around and smiling. "Wow! You've been busy," he smiled, looking at all the toys for the boys.

"They're bringing our furniture tomorrow. Would you like some tea?"

"I would love a glass - lots of ice."

"Momma bought us a new pool," Cody said to Randy.

"A new pool and some goggles," chimes in Samuel. "Do you wanna swim in our pool with Cody and me?"

"I didn't bring my swim suit. Maybe when I get home from work tomorrow I'll swim with you guys!"

"Randy, look at me. I can hold my head under water a long time," Cody said as he jumped back into the water.

"Wow, that's cool, Cody. Can you hold your head under, Samuel?"

"I learned how to swim today," Samuel said, showing off for Randy.

"That's awesome.

The two boys splashed and played for a little while longer - Randy and Debbie sat on the porch talking for a little while. "Debbie, where are we headed? I'd really like to know what you want?"

"I'm not really sure, Randy. I just don't want the boys to be hurt anymore."

"I think you're afraid of 'you' being hurt again." He reached over and held her hand for a few minutes. "There's no rush, Debbie. I have been hurt, too. It scares me to death thinking about how I've begun to feel about you in these few short days. What frightens me the most is that you might not feel the same way about me."

Debbie just sat there, looking down at the boys playing in the yard. Tears were threatening her eyes but she held them back without saying a word. She wanted to say something to him but the moment passed by. Cody and Samuel came running up the porch, sloshing water on each of them and laughing.

"Cody, here's your towel. Samuel, get over here and let me dry you off."

"You two don't need back in the pool this evening. As a matter of fact, it's time you two come in and got dressed. Come on, I'll turn on some cartoons." Smiling at Randy, she said, "I'll be right back."

After helping them into dry clothes, she stretched out their sleeping bag in front of the TV so they could lay and watch TV. Samuel took his sipping cup and lay back on his pillow beside his brother.

She walked outside on the front porch with Randy.

"For a long time I have wanted the boys to be happy, Randy. Finally, I see them playing and laughing and enjoying life like children are supposed to do. I want to be happy, too. And for what it's worth, I want you to be happy, too. I have two little boys whom I have made my priority in life. As far you and me, well, I honestly don't know. My feelings for you are too real, and it scares me. I've asked myself several times if we're not rushing things. We've only known you a few days. What happens if you wake up one morning and realize you don't a ready-made family?" She turned to look at him.

"That's not fair, Debbie. I want you, Cody and Samuel in my life. Give me a chance to show you how much I care for you and the boys. All day long, all I could think about was telling you this. Don't send me away. I know that Jeffries guy hurt you real bad, but I'm not him. In the short while I've known you, I am crazy for you."

Samuel came outside at that moment and climbed into Debbie's lap and twisted a strand of her long blonde hair between his fingers. She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "What's your brother doing?"

"He's watching TV," Samuel answered.

She looked at Randy and said, "I would never send you away."

The moment was broken. Randy's cell phone rang. "Hey!" he answered. "Can I call you back later this evening? Bye."

"Mommy, come inside," Samuel said, climbing off her lap and going back inside the house.

"Okay, Baby, I'm coming."

"I'll see you later," Randy said. He walked down the steps, and he turned and said, "Debbie, can we talk after the boys go to bed tonight?"

"Sure," she said, aware that she wanted to call him back. "I'd like that."

He put his cowboy hat on and walked down the walk way and out the gate. She went inside, locking the front door behind her. She knew that she and Randy were getting too close and it frightened her to some extent. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and tell him how she really felt but something inside her held her back. He was a handsome man and there were a lot of women who would cut off their right arm to have a man like him. She knew too that there were other women in his life that he needed to set free before making a commitment to her.

Debbie fixed the boys dinner. They watched a movie together before she put them in bed.

About nine-thirty, Randy phoned her and said he was on his way over. Both boys were asleep on the living room floor in their sleeping bags.

Debbie joined him on the porch steps. "Debbie, if you think that I would ever hurt you, then you don't me very well. You are a beautiful woman with two beautiful children," he said pulling her into his arms. "My heart beats with yours," he whispered into her hair.

She let him hold her. She started to cry and let him hold her for a long while until she stopped crying. He kissed her cheeks, absorbing the tears with his lips. "It's okay," he said. "I will always be here for you."

Coupling her face with his hands, he whispered, "Debbie. Debbie. Debbie." He pulled her closer and kissed her deeply. This time she didn't pull away.

Pulling away, Randy said, "I need to go home, Debbie or else I won't be going home tonight. I want to make love to you but this is not the time. Keep your cell phone close, make sure the security alarm is on, and lock all the doors. I'll wait here until you're inside." He pulled her back into his arms for another instant before standing. "Go inside. This is not the night, Debbie."

She knew that she wanted him to stay too, so she turned and walked inside. She checked the alarm and made sure the doors were locked. After she showered, she stretched out her sleeping bag between the boys and climbed inside. The phone rang. Randy whispered, "Good night, Debbie. I'll keep my cell close. Call me if you need me. Good night."

"Good night, Randy."

The next morning, Randy stopped by before going to work. Debbie heard his footsteps on the front porch and she unlocked the door. "Good morning. Would you like coffee?"

"Please!" he answered. "I was headed to work and decided to see if you needed anything from Albuquerque. I can pick it up on my way home this afternoon."

"I bought some lumber to build the boys a tree house at the hardware store in Meadow Lake yesterday. Could you stop by and pick up the lumber I bought?"

"It would be my pleasure. Do you think I can help you guys with the tree house project? I've built a couple of tree houses in my time!"

"We'd love for you to help."

"This weekend, the girls are coming over. We're driving over to Durango, Colorado and spend a couple of nights. Would you three care to join us? I have a camp house in Durango - we were going to ride the train over to Silverton and back and take in a cowboy show and barbeque."

"That would be great. Do you think the girls would mind?"

"Not at all. Liz and her three are driving over as well. They have a camp house too and we usually do a family outing like this once in a while especially during the warmer months."

"We'd love to come," Debbie said.

Randy drank his coffee and placed his empty cup in the sink. "I've got some errands to run in the city and check on things at the office. I'll pick up the lumber on my way home this afternoon. What are your

plans today?"

"The furniture is being delivered. That's it."

He walked over to Debbie and gently pulled her into his arms, holding her to him almost gently. He whispered softly, "I'll see you later today." He turned and walked out the front door and was gone.

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