

“Why don’t you start living your life again?” Paula Barton spoke sharply to JD Selkirk as he lay in a Veterans Administration hospital bed in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

She had a helluva nerve. Paula was his sister’s friend, not his. Paula often tagged along on his family’s daily visits. Today, she was his only visitor.

He asked, “Where’s my family? They’re usually here by now.”

Paula put her hands on her generous hips. “Would you stop trying to change the subject? When are you going to get on with your life?”

Why Paula came to bother him, day in and day out, he didn’t get. She was a good-looking woman, if you liked the pushy, no-nonsense type. Which he didn’t. Probably came from her father owning half of Oregon. She was always brimming with self-confidence, with easy solutions to tough problems. She didn’t even bother with makeup the way other women did. He wouldn’t call Paula plain. She had big, dark eyes and pale skin that contrasted well with her dark hair. She had an attractive full figure, too, though she did nothing to show it off.

“Why don’t you wear jewelry like other women?” He didn’t feel like chitchat. Why was she here at all?

Paula’s expression froze. She crossed her arms—defensive gesture for sure—and gazed at him, taking his measure and making it clear from her expression that she thought he stunk. He did, too. He felt like dirt today and Paula being here annoyed him, so tough on her.

“JD, what I look like doesn’t matter a hill of beans to you. You pick on people to push them away. Not playing that game.”

“Why don’t you just leave?” he said sourly.

“Why don’t you make me?” she asked, fire in her dark eyes.

He sat up in the bed, as if to get out of it. The pain in his gut came again. Vicious, uncontrollable pain. He sank back down on the sheets, striving to keep his face expressionless. He took a long, shallow breath to control it. Paula glared at him, unaware. Good. Let her think he’d backed down.

“Go home,” he said again.

“Your family needs you.”

“Nobody needs a cripple like me and I don’t need anyone.” When he lay back, the pain eased off. Paula didn’t know about his next operation, the one the doctors wanted but he was resisting.

He wished everyone would leave him alone. Why should he pretend he could ever resume a normal life? The doctors kept saying he’d be fine. Right. Like he wanted to be that loser guy everybody felt sorry for.

“Your brother doesn’t want to run the ranch anymore. He’s about to sell it.”

“Sell? No way. Over my dead body.”