



Nelson's Brand (Harlequin Bestsellers)

By Diana Palmer

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CAN HE GET PAST BETRAYAL?

Allison Hathoway's life was about healing. And she was good at it. Or had been good at it until the tragedy in South America. Now she couldn't even fix herself. She didn't know how to go on, didn't know what to do, or who to be.

She had that in common with Gene Nelson. After the rancher found out the truth about his father, he'd realized his whole life was a lie. He'd gone a little wild, and saw no reason not to give in to his every desire. And the minute he saw Allison, he wanted her. But underneath their explosive passion, Allison and Gene found comfort in each other's wounded souls. And a chance to start over.

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Nelson's Brand (Harlequin Bestsellers) By Diana Palmer Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #111718 in eBooks
- Published on: 2014-05-14
- Released on: 2014-05-14
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

The prolific author of more than one hundred books, Diana Palmer got her start as a newspaper reporter. A New York Times bestselling author and voted one of the top ten romance writers in America, she has a gift for telling the most sensual tales with charm and humor. Diana lives with her family in Cornelia, Georgia.

USA Today Bestselling Author, Kathie DeNosky, writes highly emotional stories laced with a good dose of humor. Kathie lives in her native southern Illinois and loves writing at night while listening to country music on her favorite radio station.

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He was very noticeable, and he knew it. He also had a pretty formidable reputation locally with women and he didn't usually turn down blatant invitations. But the wide-eyed scrutiny he was getting from the woman at the corner table only irritated him tonight. The past six months had been difficult, and he'd been drinking too much and womanizing too much...or so his family kept saying. Not that he was listening to them much these days. Not when he knew that they weren't really his family.

She wasn't hard on the eyes. He gave her one encompassing glance that took in everything from the French plait of black hair at her nape, down high, firm breasts under a soft white blouse, to a small waist and full hips and long elegant legs in tight jeans. She was sitting at a corner table, a little away from it on one side, with his half brother Dwight, and Dwight's fiancée, Winnie. He didn't know her name, but he was pretty sure that she was Winnie's out-of-town houseguest. Pryor, Wyoming, was a small town, and news traveled fast when anyone had company.

He took another sip of his whiskey and stared at the small shot glass contemplatively. He drank far too much lately. When he started staying out late at night and couldn't remember anything about it the next morning, he needed to take another look at his life, he thought bitterly. Dale Branigan had caught him in a weak moment and now she was hounding him for dates. Not that she was bad-looking, but she reminded him of the excesses that were taking him straight to hell, according to Dwight.

He glanced toward Dwight's disapproving face, so unlike his, and deliberately raised the shot glass to his thin lips with a mocking smile. He drained it, but when the bartender asked if he wanted another, he said no. It wasn't Dwight who stopped him. It was the expression on that woman's face who was sitting with Dwight and Winnie. There was something quiet and calming about her face, about the oddly compassionate way she was looking at him. What he'd thought was a flirting stare didn't seem to be one. As he met her eyes across the room, he felt a jolt of pure emotion run through him. Odd. He hadn't felt that before. Maybe it was the liquor.

He looked around. The bar was crowded, and there weren't many women around. Thank God Dale wasn't here to pester him. Frequently on a Friday night, he drove up to Billings for a little entertainment. Tonight, he wasn't in the mood. He'd overheard a chance remark from one of his men and his quick temper had cost him a good mechanic. It was his nature to strike out when he was angry. With a soft, cold laugh he considered that he'd probably inherited that trait from his father. From his *real* father, not the man who'd been married to his mother for more than twenty years. Until six months ago, his name had been Gene Nelson and he was accepted by everyone as Hank Nelson's son. But six months ago, Hank Nelson had died—ten years after Gene's mother— and he'd left a will that was as much a confession as a bequeath. It had

contained the shocking news that he'd adopted Gene at the age of four.

Gene realized that he was idly sliding the shot glass around on the bar and stopped. He paid for the drink and turned toward the door.

Dwight called to him and he hesitated. His younger half brother was the head honcho at the Triple N Ranch now. That was the biggest blow to his pride. He'd been the eldest son. Now he was the outsider, and Dwight was the rightful heir. That took a lot of getting used to after thirty years.

He cocked his hat over one eye and strode toward Dwight's table, his lean, dark face rigid, his pale green eyes like wet peridots under lashes as thick and black as the straight hair under the gray Stetson.

"You haven't met Gene, have you, Allison?" Winnie asked, smiling. She was blond and petite and very pretty. Her fairness matched Dwight's, who also had blond hair and blue eyes, a fact that had often puzzled Gene. Their sister Marie was equally fair. Only Gene was dark, and he alone had green eyes. His mother had been a blue-eyed blonde, like Hank Nelson. Why had he never connected those stray facts? Perhaps he'd been dodging the issue all along.

"No, we haven't met," Allison said softly. She looked up at Gene with hazel eyes that were his instant undoing. He'd never seen eyes like that.

There was something in them that made him feel warm inside. "How do you do, Mr. Nelson?" she asked, and she smiled. It was like sunshine on a cloudy day.

He caught his breath silently. She'd called him Mr. Nelson, but he wasn't a Nelson. He straightened. What the hell, it was the only name he'd ever known. He nodded curtly. "Miss...?"

"Hathoway," she replied.

"Are you on your way back to the ranch?" Dwight asked, his tone reconciliatory, hesitant.

"Yes."

"I'll see you there, then."

Gene let his eyes fall to the woman again, to her gentle oval face. Her eyes and mouth were her best features. She wasn't really pretty, but she had a glow about her. It grew as he looked at her unsmilingly, and he finally realized that she was blushing. Strange response, for a woman her age. She was out of her teens; probably in her mid-twenties.

"Gene, are you coming to the barbecue tomorrow night?" Winnie asked.

He was still staring at Allison. "Maybe." His head moved a little to the side as he looked down at Allison. "Are you Winnie's houseguest?" he asked her, his voice slow and deep, without a noticeable accent.

"Yes," she said. "Just for a couple of weeks, I mean," she stammered. He made her nervous. She'd never felt such an instant attraction to anyone.

Unbeknownst to her, neither had Gene. He was having a hard time trying to drag himself away. This woman

made him feel as if he'd suddenly come out of a daze, and he didn't understand why. "I've got to get home," he said, forcing the words out. He nodded curtly and left them, his booted feet heavy on the wood floor, his back arrow-straight.

Allison Hathoway watched him go. She'd never seen anyone quite as fascinating as the departing Mr. Nelson. He looked like a cowboy she'd seen in a movie once, tall and lean and lithe, with wide shoulders and narrow hips and long, powerful legs. She, who had little if anything to do with men, was so affected by him that she was still flushed and shaking inside from the brief encounter.

"I didn't think he was going to stop," Dwight said with a rueful smile. "He avoids me a lot these days. Marie, too. Except to start fights."

"It isn't getting any easier at home, is it?" Winnie asked her fiancé, laying a small hand on his.

Dwight shook his head as he curled his fingers around hers. "Gene won't talk about it. He just goes on as if nothing has happened. Marie's at the end of her rope, and so am I. We love him, but he's convinced himself that he's no longer part of our family."

Allison listened without understanding what they were talking about.

"Is he much older than you, Dwight?" she asked.

He lifted an eyebrow, smiling at her interest. "About six years. He's thirty-four."

"But he's not a man to risk your heart on," Winnie said softly. "Gene's just gone through a bad time. He's hurt and he's ready to lash out at anybody who gets too close."

"I hate to agree, but she's right," Dwight replied quietly. "Gene's gone from bad to worse in the past few months. Women, liquor, fights. He threw a punch at our mechanic and fired him this morning."

"The man deserved it," Winnie said quietly. "You know what he called Gene."

"He wouldn't have called Gene anything if my brother hadn't started acting like one of the hands instead of the boss," Dwight said angrily. "He hates the routine of working cattle every day. He had the business head and he was good at organization. I'm not. I was better at working cattle and taking care of the shipping and receiving. The will reversed our duties. Now we're both miserable. I can't handle the men, and Gene won't. The ranch is going to pot because he won't buckle down. He drinks on the weekends and the men's morale is at rock bottom. They're looking for excuses to quit or get fired."

"But...he only had one drink at the bar," Allison said softly, puzzled, because one drink surely wasn't that bad.

Dwight lifted a blond eyebrow. "So he did. He kept glancing at you, and then he put down the glass. I was watching. It seemed to bother him. That's the first time I've known him to stop at one drink."

"He always used to," Winnie recalled. "In fact, he hardly ever touched the stuff."

"He's so damned brittle," Dwight sighed. "He can't bend. God, I feel for him! I can imagine how it would be if I were in his shoes. He's so alone."

"Most people are, really," Allison said, her hazel eyes soft and quiet. "And when they hurt, they do bad things sometimes."

Winnie smiled at her warmly. "You'd find excuses for hardened criminals, wouldn't you?" she asked gently. "I suppose that's why you're so good at what you do."

"At what I *did*," Allison corrected. Her eyes fell worriedly to the table. "I don't know that I'll ever be able to do it again."

"You need time," Winnie replied sympathetically. "That's all, Allie. You just need time."

"Something I have in common with your future brother-in-law, I gather," came the reply. Allison sighed and sipped her ginger ale. "I hope you're right."

But that night, alone in bed, the nightmares came again and she woke, as she always did these days, in a cold sweat, trying not to hear the sound of guns, the sound of screams.

She wrapped her white chenille bathrobe around her worn white gown and made her way to the kitchen. Winnie was already there. Her mother was still in bed. Mrs. Manley was no early bird, even if her daughter was.

Allison's long black hair was around her shoulders in a wavy tangle, her hazel eyes bloodshot, her face pale. She felt dragged out.

"Bad dreams again, I'll bet," Winnie said gently.

Allison managed a wan smile. She accepted the cup of hot black coffee Winnie handed her as they sat down at the kitchen table. "It's better than it was," she said.

"I'm just glad that you came to us," Winnie replied. She was wearing an expensive pink silk ensemble. The Manleys were much better off financially than the Hathoways had ever been, but Mrs. Manley and Allison's late mother had been best friends. As they grew up, Winnie and Allison became best friends, too.

They'd all lived near Bisbee, Arizona, when the girls were young and in school. Then the Manleys had moved to Pryor, Wyoming, when Mr. Manley took another job with an international mining concern. The Hathoways had been reassigned and Allison had gone with them to Central America.

The last few weeks could have been just a bad memory except that Allison was alone now. She'd called Winnie the minute she'd landed in the States again, and Winnie had flown down to Tucson to pick her up. It had been days before Allison could stop crying. Now, at last, she was beginning to heal. Yesterday was the first time Winnie had been able to coax her out among people. Allison was running from the news media that had followed her to Tucson, and she didn't want any attention drawn to her. She'd successfully covered her tracks, but she didn't know for how long.

Users Review

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Robert Burdette:

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