

JUDY
CHRISTENBERRY



COMING
HOME TO THE
CATTLEMAN

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Judy Christenberry

Coming Home To The Cattleman

«HarperCollins»

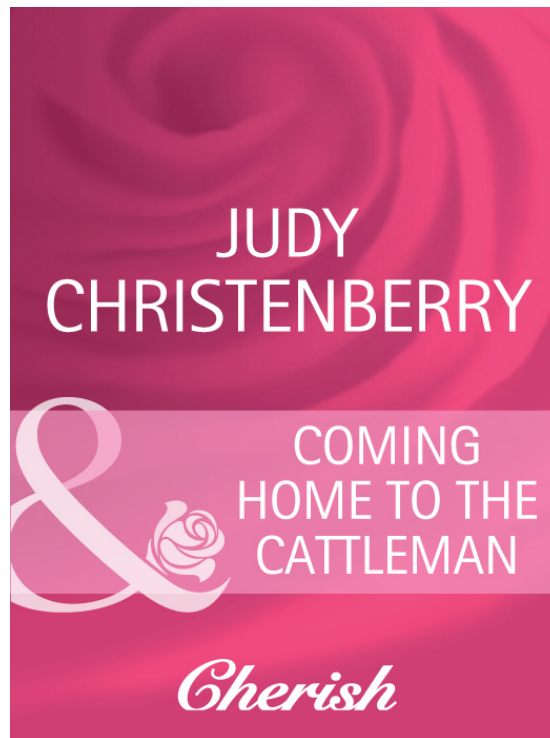
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Coming Home To The Cattleman / J. Christenberry —
«HarperCollins»,

Jenny has distant, happy memories of her long-lost dad, and has finally gained the confidence to find him. Only one man stands in her way: the aloof and brooding Jason Welborn—her dad's business partner. And it's clear he's not happy she's come home.... Jason's convinced this city girl has only come to claim her share in the business, and then hotfoot it back to the Big Apple. But Jenny seems determined to win him over, and the more he tries to push her away, the more feisty Jenny's response becomes. Slowly but surely she's starting to get under Jason's skin....

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**Jason just knew that Jenny was nothing but trouble
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When he parked by the barn, she pulled up next to him. Jason noticed that she just sat in her car, not moving. Was she waiting for him to open her door for her? She probably had people who did that for her in New York. Well, not here. Jason wanted to walk away, to leave her sitting in her car. But Sam had asked him to do the job. Opening her car door, he said, “We’re here, Miss Watson. Are you going to get out?”

He noticed that she simply looked up at the house, wringing her hands together, as though nervous. Eventually she shook herself and looked Jason squarely in the eye. “Sorry, yes! Yes, I’m coming.” She started walking toward the house. Toward her old life.

JUDY CHRISTENBERRY

has written more than seventy-five books and is a favorite with readers.

Step into a world where family counts, men are true to their word—and where romance always wins the day!

“Thank you, Judy Christenberry, for the hours of entertainment.”

—CataRomance

“Judy Christenberry tells the perfect tale.”

—Romantic Times BOOKreviews

“Christenberry masterfully maps out the birth of a family with warmth, humor and love.”

—Romantic Times BOOKreviews

Judy Christenberry

Coming Home to the Cattleman



Judy Christenberry has been writing romances for fifteen years, because she loves happy endings as much as her readers do. A former French teacher, Judy now devotes herself to writing full-time. She hopes readers have as much fun reading her stories as she does writing them. She spends her spare time reading, watching her favorite sports teams and keeping track of her two daughters. Judy's a native Texan, and lives in Dallas.



In the cowboy's arms...

Imagine a world where men are strong and true to their word...and where romance always wins the day! These rugged ranchers may seem tough on the exterior, but they are about to meet their match when they meet strong, loving women to care for them!

If you love gorgeous cowboys and Western settings, this miniseries is for you!

Judy takes us to the wilds of Wyoming in *The Rancher's Inherited Family Out* in August, only from Harlequin Romance®

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CHAPTER ONE

JASON Welborn stared at the young woman who had just approached the check-in desk of the local hotel in McAfee, Oklahoma. She wasn't what he expected.

With a frown, he approached her. "Miss Watson?"

The woman whirled around in surprise, the hope in her gaze quickly dying. "Yes?"

"I'm Jason Welborn, your father's partner. He had an appointment this morning that he couldn't miss. He asked me to meet you and invite you to the ranch. He'll meet us there."

"All right. As soon as I register, I'll—"

"No," Jason interrupted. "Sam wanted you to come to the ranch for the length of your stay." She continued to stare at him. "If you don't mind," he added reluctantly.

Jason saw the woman pause slightly, as if she wondered whether going with him was a good idea. After taking a deep breath she collected herself, "Very well, Mr. Welborn." Then she turned and thanked the man behind the desk and said to Jason, "I can follow you to the ranch. I have a rental car."

Jason didn't think Sam had planned on her hiring a rental car. With a shrug he agreed.

He followed her out the door and took the opportunity to take a closer look at the woman he had come to meet and who he already didn't trust. She was good-looking, he'd give her that. Her dark hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail, and her features were perfect, her blue eyes remarkably like her father's. But if she was anything like her mother, from what Sam had said, she was to be avoided at all costs.

Once she was in her car, a brand-new sedan, Jason climbed into his SUV and headed down the narrow road that would lead to the ranch he shared with Sam Sanders. He'd met Sam ten years ago, long after Jennifer Watson had been taken away by her mother to live in New York. Sam had been a drunkard, wasting his life and his ranch.

Jason frowned as he recalled that night many years ago. Sam had been sure he could drive home from the bar, but Jason had driven him. Jason's own parents had died in an accident with a drunk and the pain still haunted him. Jason had made sure that Sam had gotten home safely, and their close friendship had begun that night.

Now this woman was going to hurt Sam. Jason just knew that was going to happen. A New York woman, just like her mother. He ground his teeth and fought to control his anger.

When he parked by the barn, she pulled up next to him. Jason noticed that she just sat in her car, not moving. What was wrong with her? Was she waiting for him to open her door? She probably had people who did that for her in New York. Well, not here. Jason wanted to walk away, leave her sitting in her car. But Sam had asked him to do the job.

Opening her car door, he said, "We're here Miss Watson, are you going to get out?"

She turned to stare at him. "Oh! Oh, yes... It hasn't changed that much, has it?"

He stared at her. Then he turned away. She hadn't seen the place when it had been suffering from Sam's neglect. "Rachel is waiting to see you."

His words stirred her, much to his surprise. Rachel had been the housekeeper for as long as Jason had known Sam. Was she so important to Jennifer after all these years? Where did that leave Sam?

"Do you think Da—I mean, Sam—is back, too?"

"Not yet."

"Oh, okay. I'll... I'll just get my bag."

He stood there, fighting the gentlemanly behavior his mother had taught him. After she lifted her bag from the trunk of her rental car, Jason reached out and took it. Without waiting for her, he started toward the house.

When he didn't hear her following him, he turned around. "Aren't you coming, Miss Watson?"

Jason noticed that she simply stood looking up at the house, wringing her hands together as though she was nervous. Eventually she shook herself and looked Jason squarely in the eye. “Sorry. Yes! Yes, I’m coming.” She started walking toward the house.

Her shoes had a low heel. Acceptable wear. In the hard-packed dirt, she was able to move all right. He couldn’t fault her there. But he could fault her on her treatment of her father.

Eighteen years of silence and she shows up now to “get to know him.” Why hadn’t she answered his letters over the years? Why hadn’t she ever called? Sam hadn’t complained. At least, not to Jason. But he knew how much her absence had hurt him. And now she was back.

Just then Rachel came to the back door, watching them approach. Jason didn’t know what Rachel thought about Jennifer’s reappearance. She was intensely loyal to Sam, always had been, and she had stuck by him when he had hit rock bottom. Maybe she would ignore this smartly dressed young woman. Jason sure hoped so.

But his hope for Rachel’s support disappeared as soon as she stepped outside the house. The young woman’s face lit up and she hurried to meet Rachel.

“Oh, Rachel,” she said with a sob, wrapping her arms around the housekeeper.

“Jenny,” Rachel said, an uncertain smile on her face and tears in her eyes as she stepped back from the younger woman’s hug to look at her. “You have certainly grown up.”

“I should hope so,” Jennifer said, her voice shaking.

“I’m twenty-six now.”

“I know, it’s been so long. Come on in. I’m glad you’ve come.”

Jenny paused before asking, “Is...is he here?”

Rachel shot Jason a quick knowing look. Then she said, “No, he’s not here yet.”

“I’m...I’m anxious to see him. Is he doing all right?”

“He’s fine,” Jason said, then added, “At least he was until he got your letter.”

Both women turned to stare at him, but he didn’t back down. He’d seen the anguish Sam had suffered when he’d read the letter that had arrived just a couple of weeks ago. Jason had feared he would reach for the nearest bottle again. But he hadn’t.

Rachel led Jennifer into the kitchen and Jason followed.

“I’ll take your bag up to your room,” he growled.

“No!” She looked him in the eye. “I’ll wait until he comes. He may prefer that I...I leave.”

“No, he won’t, honey,” Rachel assured Jennifer.

She smiled at Rachel, a small smile full of long history. “I think I should wait, anyway. He may r-regret his offer of hospitality.”

An uncomfortable silence fell between the group. “How about a glass of iced tea?” Rachel said, trying to lighten the mood.

“I’d love one.”

Jason set her bag against the wall. “I’ll take a glass, too, Rachel, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, Jason. I even made some cookies. You used to love them, Jenny.”

“Your oatmeal-raisin-pecan cookies? They are so good! I’ve never found any like them anywhere else.”

“I’m glad you remember them,” Rachel said with a smile.

Jennifer looked at her. “I remember a lot.”

They all heard the automobile coming down the driveway. Jason thought Jennifer would be pleased, but she seemed to freeze, staring at the back door but not moving.

Rachel walked to the window over the sink. “That’s your daddy,” she said to Jennifer.

As if facing a firing squad, Jennifer slowly stood, continuing to stare at the back door.

Jennifer’s stomach had butterflies that were doing flips. Many years ago she’d almost made herself sick with missing her father and her home. She’d pleaded with her mother to take her back

to her father's ranch. But her mother had been adamant that her father didn't want her. He would have preferred to have had a son.

Over the years Jennifer had hung on to the hope that her father would come back for her, but he never had. Maybe her mother had been right after all. The young man who claimed to be his partner was only a few years older than her. Had her father transferred his affection for Jennifer to Jason Welborn?

Was that why he'd never answered her letters? She'd worked so hard on them, pouring out her love and hope for a reunion. She'd hurried home from school each day, looking for a letter from her daddy.

Nothing.

Now, at twenty-six, she needed to know just what had happened all those years ago. So she had written to her father one final time, asking to meet him. She hadn't been sure he'd respond or if he'd even want to meet her. But she'd come anyway, hoping for a miracle.

The back door opened and the man she remembered, with a few more lines around his eyes and a few more gray hairs, stood in front of her. At least, she thought she remembered him. There'd been no pictures of him.

Her heart was in her mouth. Words couldn't get past that lump. She stared at him, wanting so badly to close the gap between them by rushing into his arms. But he did nothing to encourage her, and her feet remained glued to the floor.

Rachel seemed to realize her predicament. "Look, Sam, Jenny's come home."

"It hasn't been her home for eighteen years, Rachel," Sam said harshly.

Jennifer felt the blood leave her face, and she wavered, fearing she would faint. Such rejection in the face of her hopes. "Hello...Sam." She didn't dare call him Dad. He'd made his feelings clear.

"Hello."

Jennifer slowly sat down. "I appreciate the offer to stay here. It was more than generous." Her voice didn't sound right, but it was the best she could do.

He nodded and looked away.

If he wasn't even going to look at her, then she had no reason to stay. She stood again and started for her bag. "I think I'll go back to the hotel."

"No! No, you'll stay here. I won't have the town talking about us!"

Jennifer sat back down. She couldn't stand up to receive the indictment that she felt was coming. She hadn't wanted to believe all her mother's rantings about her father, but maybe now she should.

"Do you want some iced tea, Sam?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah, that would be good." Sam moved to the table but took the seat farthest from Jennifer. As if she carried a disease.

Jason took the seat next to Sam as though he was showing what side he was on. Was he trying to prove to Jennifer how much more her father favored him over her?

Jennifer bent her head, hoping to hide the tears she felt forming in her eyes. She was beginning to think it had been a mistake to come here. How could she stay here? How could she accept her father's rejection for a second time?

"How are you, Jennifer?" Sam asked after a minute.

She blinked several times before she raised her head. "I'm fine. I...I was surprised to see that the place still looks the same," she said.

"We're managing to stay afloat. But I have to warn you I don't have as much money as I used to have. If you're here to get some money, I can't give you any." He sounded angry.

Another blow. He thought she was here to take. Jennifer again swallowed the urge to leave. She knew that if she didn't fight for at least acceptance from her father, she'd have nothing.

“I didn’t come to get money...Sam. I just...just thought that maybe it was time to get to know each other. We haven’t seen each other in such a long time. I hoped you wouldn’t mind seeing me for a little while. I’ll leave as soon as you want me to go.”

Sam was silent for a moment as he looked down at the table. “Okay,” he agreed with no emotion. “I have to change clothes and get to work. Ask Rachel for anything you want.” And he got up and left the room without even tasting the tea Rachel had fixed for him.

Jason stood and followed him.

Jennifer sat there, staring at the chair her father had occupied. She didn’t realize she was crying until Rachel handed her a tissue.

“Don’t cry, Jenny. It was hard for him when you left, and it’s been a long time. Things can’t be changed overnight.”

Jennifer wiped her cheeks dry. “No...I guess not.” After a moment she asked, “I’m not sure I should even be here, it seems so hard between us! Should I leave, Rachel? Would that be for the best?”

“No! Never, Jenny. Just give your dad some time. Do you need to go back to New York right away?”

“No. I quit my job when Mom died. There was so much to take care of, and I wasn’t happy there. I’d always wanted to come back home.”

“I’m glad you think of it as your home. Let’s go get you settled in your room.” Rachel stepped over to Jennifer’s suitcase and picked it up. “Just follow me.”

Jennifer followed Rachel up the staircase and turned right to go to her old room. When Rachel opened the door, Jennifer entered and was immediately struck by how much time had passed since she’d left the ranch. She had expected the room to look the same as it had when she’d been a little girl, but of course all her toys were gone, except for one stuffed rabbit that rested its head on the pillows. The gaily decorated room she’d left when she was eight was now an elegant room done in shades of blue.

“I love the way you’ve decorated the room, Rachel,” she said, pasting a smile on her face.

“We kept it the same for a long time, Jenny, but when it was obvious you weren’t coming home, I changed it because...because your father couldn’t deal with...with the memories.”

It was the first sign Jennifer had that her father had any kind of emotions for her. “He missed me?”

“Of course he did! Something fierce. If Jason hadn’t come along and helped him, I’m not sure he’d be alive now.”

“Oh. Jason. I can tell that they’re very close.”

“Yes, they are. Jason has been good to your father. It would be a mistake if you tried to come between them, Jenny.”

“No, Rachel, I would never do that. I know—I’m sure he’s been very helpful to...Sam.”

“Why don’t you call him Dad?”

Jennifer blew out a long breath. “I don’t know, Rachel, he doesn’t seem to want me to. He didn’t even touch me when he saw me.”

“You didn’t touch him, either.”

“No. I guess I was afraid to.”

“Well, give it time. Why don’t you unpack and come back down and then we’ll talk some more.”

“All right. Rachel, thank you for welcoming me. I’ve missed you.”

Rachel hugged her. “I’ve missed you, too. It was a dark day when your mother took you away.”

“Yeah, for me, too.”

Sam sank down on his bed and stared into space.

His door opened and he looked up to see Jason standing there.

“Are you okay, Sam?”

“Yeah.” Nothing more. He couldn’t seem to put his emotions into words.

“She’s a beautiful woman,” Jason said bleakly.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t trust her do you? Is that why you lied about your wealth? Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you did, it’s better to have that understanding up-front.”

With a weary sigh, Sam shook his head.

“You could tell her to go away, if that’s what you want.”

“It isn’t. I want to try again, Jason, but it’s been so long it’s hard. She was so sweet and loving when she was a child. I adored her. That’s why it hurt so much when Lorraine took her away. She was my world. I did everything for her future.”

Jason stepped to Sam’s side and put his hand on his shoulder. “I know that, Sam, but go slow. There’s no rush. You were hurt badly last time, don’t be so easily knocked off your pins this time.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, but he was heartsick. He’d wanted to put his arms around Jenny and swear he’d never let her go again. But Sam knew he’d have to. Her home was in New York. A foreign land to him. Jennifer’s mother had come to Oklahoma on a vacation. He’d fallen for her at once. Two weeks later they’d married.

Too late Sam had realized she’d married him for his money. At least, it had seemed that way to him. She’d expected luxuries he’d never heard of. When he’d accused her of hating life on the ranch, she’d agreed. But by then she had been pregnant with Jenny.

Before Jenny had been born, he’d hired Rachel to help take care of the baby and keep the house clean. Lorraine had never bothered with cooking and cleaning, and with Jenny’s arrival she’d become totally uninterested in her daughter, too. And then, when Jenny was eight, Lorraine had suddenly decided to take his little girl to New York to meet her grandmother.

They’d never come back.

Sam had realized that his marriage had been a mistake, but he had wanted Jenny back. He’d finally flown to New York to talk to Lorraine and try to at least get visitation. She’d refused and had assured him that Jenny never asked about him or expressed any desire to go back to Oklahoma.

And so, desolate, Sam had come home and turned to drink, burying his head and ignoring his ranch. Then, at his lowest point, he’d met Jason. The boy had helped him stop drinking and shown him new ways to improve his land. He’d given Jason ten percent of the ranch each year until he now owned forty-nine percent. Financially they were doing well.

But Sam had lied to Jenny about his wealth, sure that she’d come back only to see what she could get from her father. She had spent so much time with her mother, some of her bad ways must have rubbed off on her, and until he knew otherwise he was going to take care, as Jason suggested.

He wanted to get to know his daughter, but the thought of history repeating itself plagued him. What did they have in common after all this time, and what kind of relationship could they have now? No. The only reason she could be here was she’d spent all her mother’s money. That had to be it.

After unpacking her belongings and putting them in the closet and chest of drawers, Jennifer sat down on the edge of the bed to shore up her emotions. She wasn’t going to spend her time at the ranch crying over spilt milk.

She was going to be strong, as strong as her father had taught her to be.

Until her mother had taken her New York, Jenny had spent most of her time with her father. The rest of the time she’d spent with Rachel. She had gone to New York—she’d had very little choice—but once there she had seldom seen her mother. Her mother hadn’t had time for her once they had gotten back to the big city and the whirling social scene her mother loved. Jenny had had a nanny who took her to school and oversaw her homework and generally had taken the place of her mother. She had been made to dine regularly with her mother and grandmother, but it had been a chore that she’d dreaded.

They'd used the time at dinner to instruct her in manners and social etiquette. Then they'd gone out for the evening and she was turned back over to the nanny.

So Jenny had drawn on the lessons her father had taught her, lessons of heart and beliefs of heritage and strength. They'd gotten her through. Maybe she'd exaggerated them in her mind. Maybe he hadn't loved her as much as she'd believed.

But now she was going to try again.

She had to.

She stood and opened the door to her room. Going back down the stairs, she was reminded of going down in the mornings as an eight-year-old, already dressed for her day, eager to get on her pony and accompany her father as he went about his duties.

Would he let her ride? One of the few battles she'd won with her mother was for riding lessons in Central Park on Saturday mornings. She'd love to ride again on the endless prairies of Oklahoma.

When she reached the kitchen, she found Rachel preparing lunch.

"What can I do to help, Rachel?" she asked from the doorway.

"Why, nothing, child. Just keep me company."

"Rachel, I know how to cook. Mother's chef taught me quite a lot. I'll be glad to help."

"A chef? My, that must've been interesting. But lunch is simple. It doesn't require much effort."

"You always made your work seem easy, Rachel, but I know better. This is a big house. It must take a lot of your time."

"Well, yes, but it's my job."

"While I'm here, I'd like to help you."

"Your father wouldn't expect that of you, honey."

"He should. Now, what can I do?"

"Come peel potatoes, if you want."

"I do." Jennifer moved to the sink and picked up the potato peeler and began removing the skin from the potatoes.

As the two women worked, Jennifer said, "Do you think Sam would let me ride out with him once?"

"I'm not sure, honey. Do you think you can still ride?" Rachel asked.

"I took lessons every Saturday morning in Central Park. It was on an English saddle, of course, but I've done a lot of riding. I'd like to get back on a horse out here on the ranch."

"That will surprise your father. He figured your mother wouldn't allow anything that could remind you of life here."

"It was a battle, but not one I was prepared to lose. I didn't win it right away. At first I thought we would be returning to the ranch. I kept pestering Mom about when we would return, but eventually she told me that she had no intention of us ever coming back."

"How long did it take her to tell you that?"

"It seemed like forever, but I remember that it was actually just before Christmas. I cried for days. The only thing that made me stop crying was riding lessons. She tried to stop them every once in a while. But I won. I became quite adept at riding."

"You're pretty good at peeling potatoes, too," Rachel said with a grin. "We're going to cream them, so cut them into small pieces and put them in this pan with water and salt."

Jennifer did as Rachel asked and they worked together in silence for a moment longer. Then Rachel returned to Jennifer's original question.

"Ask your dad about riding out with him. I'm sure he'd like for you to, but he won't suggest it himself."

"Thank you, Rachel. There's so much we need to catch up on, and I don't want to make any mistakes that might affect my chance to get to know him. I was afraid to mention it."

“Don’t be. I think he wants to get to know you as much as you want to get to know him. He hurt badly when you left, and it was hard...for all of us.”

Jennifer turned to stare at Rachel and noted the affection in the older woman’s voice toward her father. Was she more than the housekeeper these days? Was Rachel in love with her father? Maybe if Jenny got to stay awhile, maybe found a place for herself in this family, she could ask Rachel, but it was still early days and Jenny still had to work out her own relationship with her father.

“It’s very good of you to be helping me, Jenny.”

“It’s no big deal, Rachel. I’m happy to help.”

“It’s nice to have another woman in the house. It’s difficult to talk to men all the time.”

“I can imagine,” Jennifer said with a laugh.

CHAPTER TWO

SAM and Jason entered the kitchen before Rachel could say anything else.

Jennifer blinked several times, regretting their intimacy had ended. If only it was as easy to talk to her father!

“Jenny, what are you doing?” Sam demanded when he saw her at the counter with Rachel.

“Making creamed potatoes,” she said, trying to smile.

“You don’t have to work while you’re here!”

“I intend to eat, so it only seems fair that I pitch in with the work.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Jason said. “After all, she’ll be causing Rachel more work.”

Sam and Rachel both stared at Jason as if he’d committed a sin, but Jennifer simply looked at him and said, “I agree.”

“Really, Jason, she’s not going to cause me more work. I have to cook for you two. Why shouldn’t I cook for one more without a problem?” Rachel demanded.

“Rachel didn’t ask me to work. I insisted,” Jennifer said, not wanting Rachel to share in the blame. “I’m not here for a free ride.”

Jason and Sam looked at each other and left the kitchen, explaining that they had paperwork to do, and Jennifer and Rachel were left alone again.

“I’m sorry, Rachel. I didn’t want to cause any trouble,” Jennifer said hesitantly.

“You didn’t, Jenny. I can handle their complaints, and I appreciate your help, but it’s the companionship I’m enjoying. You’ve been gone a long time and it’s nice to get to know you again. “

“Me, too, Rachel. You’ve worked for Sam for a long time, haven’t you?”

“Actually, he hired me right after your mother got pregnant. She wasn’t very happy living on the ranch, and she didn’t want to clean the house.”

“I guess that’s something that never changed.”

“Not even in New York?”

“No, we had several maids who cleaned, and a nanny to watch over me and a chef in the kitchen.”

“What did your mother do all day?”

“I have no idea. The nanny took me to school every morning and picked me up in the afternoon. I did homework or spent my time in the kitchen with the chef.”

“Ah. I see. You must’ve been very lonely.”

Jennifer paused for a moment as she thought about her childhood in New York. Some people thought she had been privileged, but Rachel was right, it had been lonely.

“My grandmother thought it was the only way to live, the proper way, and she paid for all of it until she died. She left everything to my mother and she continued to live that kind of lifestyle. But it was so different from my early years here.”

Rachel listened and nodded along as Jennifer spoke, but there was a sad look in her eyes. “So do you still have maids and a chef at your home in New York?”

“No. I let them go and sold the house when Mom died. I didn’t want to live there anymore.”

“So you don’t have a home now?”

Jennifer stopped what she was doing and looked at the kitchen around her. So many memories assailed her, and she took in a deep breath as she thought about Rachel’s question. Did she have a home? New York had never felt like her home, but then she had been away from the ranch for so long that she couldn’t really say this was her home, either. Releasing her breath slowly, she turned to face the older woman, who was looking at her knowingly. “I guess right at this moment the answer to that would be no. But I’m hoping that might change very soon.”

“Well let’s hope so,” Rachel answered, touching the younger girl gently on the arm. “So does this mean you can stay here as long as you want?”

“I can stay as long as Sam will let me,” Jennifer replied, mixing dressing into the salad she’d been chopping.

“Just give him time, Jenny,” Rachel said, and both women smiled at each other. They worked in silence for a few moments, preparing the remainder of the meal. Jenny creamed the potatoes while Rachel finished cooking the meat and baked some fresh rolls. Within a short time lunch was ready. Rachel stepped to the kitchen door to summon Sam and Jason.

They all sat down at the table and Sam asked the blessing. Then Rachel began passing the various dishes.

“Jenny made the potatoes and the salad,” Rachel announced proudly as they were all filling their plates.

“That was very nice of her,” Sam said, not looking at his daughter.

“It’s the least I can do while I’m staying here,” she answered, tasting a mouthful of food.

“Does that mean you plan on staying awhile, Jennifer?” Sam asked in a detached voice.

“Yes. I’d like to, if you don’t mind, that is.”

“No, I don’t mind.”

“Do you...do you think it would be possible for me to ride out with you this afternoon?”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea. I’ll be out until suppertime,” Sam answered. “I wouldn’t have time to show you how.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t have to show me. I’ve been taking riding lessons since I moved to New York. I rode on an English saddle, but I am used to riding for long periods of time.”

“Your mother permitted that?” Sam asked, his brows lowering in a frown.

“She didn’t want to, but I insisted.”

“I don’t remember your mother with a weak will.”

“No.”

“How did you convince her?”

Jennifer looked at her father. “I cried until she agreed. It was the only thing I could think of that would prepare me for coming home.”

“I see.” After a moment he looked at his daughter and said, “Okay, then, if you want to ride with us this afternoon, you can.”

“Thank you, Sam.” Jennifer smiled and her face lit up.

Jason had been silent throughout this whole exchange and had wondered how Sam would handle his daughter’s request to go riding. She was a city girl and had been away from the ranch for a long time. They didn’t have time to hold her hand while she had a holiday away from her fancy city life, and Jason knew that she would go back to New York as soon as she was bored and leave Sam heartbroken again. Well he sure as hell wasn’t going to sit around and wait for that to happen!

“Tell me, Miss Watson, did you have a job in New York?” Jason asked.

She kept her gaze on her plate. “Yes, I did.”

Surprised at her response Jason continued, “What did you do?”

“Information services.”

Sam frowned. “What does that mean?”

Jennifer smiled as she explained, “It means computer work, I worked in an office all day long. I hated it.”

“So you don’t have that job anymore?” Jason asked. He was sure that Jenny was just here for Sam’s money, and if she had given up her job to come here then that was a sure sign.

“Actually, no. I resigned it when Mom died. There...there was a lot to do. It happened so suddenly I couldn’t face going back to a job I hated.” Jennifer stopped as sudden tears clogged her eyes and throat.

Jason paused as he saw how much Jennifer was suffering and felt a sudden guilty pang at asking his questions. It had been insensitive, and he knew firsthand how hard it was to lose a parent.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” he said, and continued with his meal.

“How did she die?” Sam asked.

Jenny sniffed and composed herself. “In a car accident, it was very quick. She had her faults, but...I miss her.”

“I see,” Sam said. “She never remarried?”

“No. She wasn’t a very warm person.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Sam agreed, smiling back.

They ate in silence the rest of the meal.

When Rachel began clearing the table, Jennifer got up to help her.

“You go ahead and change into your riding clothes, Jenny, so you won’t keep your father waiting.”

“All right, Rachel. Thank you,” Jennifer said with a brief smile and rushed upstairs.

“I’ll help you, Rachel,” Jason said, getting up to carry dishes to the sink.

“I might as well help, too, instead of just sitting here waiting,” Sam said.

Rachel got all flustered; she wasn’t used to the men helping her out at all. “Really! There’s no need.”

Neither man answered her, they just carried on bringing the dishes to the counter.

The dishes were almost all loaded into the dishwasher when Jennifer came back into the kitchen. “I’m ready,” she said.

Both men turned to stare at her. She was dressed in cream tights, plush coat and a riding hat.

“You’re wearing that?” Jason asked, trying hard not to laugh. She was going to stick out like a sore thumb with the other cowboys.

Jennifer looked down at her garb. “It’s what I always wore in New York. I don’t have any jeans. Will it be okay?”

“That’ll be fine,” Sam said, shooting a warning look at Jason. Before he walked to the door, he whispered to Jason to ride ahead and warn the other men not to laugh.

Jason buried his grin and excused himself and jogged off to the barn.

Sam gestured to the door to Jennifer. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, but...but are you sure my clothes will be all right?”

“Of course. Shall we go?”

“Thanks for lunch, Rachel,” Jennifer said, kissing her cheek.

“Uh, yeah, thanks, Rachel.” Sam held the door open for Jennifer and followed her to the barn.

Jennifer knew as soon as she had seen the smile on Jason’s face that she had made a mistake with her outfit, but it was all she’d had in New York to go riding in. Her mother had insisted that if she had to ride, then she would do it properly, dressed like a lady. Back in the city it had been acceptable, but Jenny knew that out here she’d need to buy some new clothes!

As if to prove to her father and Jason that she wasn’t just some silly city girl, Jenny insisted on saddling her own horse. She felt it was important to convince them she knew what she was doing. Of course, the saddle was much heavier than she was used to, but she managed to get it on top of the saddle blanket she’d already put on the young mare Jason had suggested she ride.

With dexterity, Jennifer buckled the saddle in place. She finished before Sam did. He looked over his shoulder. “You did that real fast. Are you sure she wasn’t holding her breath?”

“Yes, I’m sure. She seems well trained.”

“Jason trained her. He’s very good with the horses.”

“He seems to be a real help to you around here. How did you meet him?”

Sam paused in saddling his horse and looked off into the distance, as though remembering a darker time. “He met me. I was dead drunk in a bar and trying to find my keys to drive home. He stopped me. He told me I shouldn’t risk other peoples’ lives by driving.”

“That was good of him.”

“Yes, it was. I’d...I’d been drinking a lot. He stayed the night and talked to me the next day about what I was doing to myself and my property. I asked him to stay a few days with me.”

“And he stayed?”

“Yeah. And he showed me a lot of new ways to improve my ranch. He’d gotten his degree from Oklahoma State University. Until he could afford to get his own property, he was rodeoing to earn money.”

“That’s a hard life.”

“Yes, it was, but he was playing it straight. He didn’t drink because his parents had died in a wreck with a drunkard. He said that saved him. It’s hard to be foolish when you’re sober.”

“I can imagine,” Jennifer answered, and realized there was much more to the surly man she had shared lunch with only moments ago. He had a depth that surprised her and he had clearly been a good influence on her father.

“Ready?” Sam asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Jennifer nodded and swung up into the saddle. Lifting her reins, she guided the mare out of the barn. She felt like she’d come home once again.

“Where are we going?”

“Out to the north pasture.” After a minute Sam added,

“We’re going to separate the herd. It’s gotten so large it’s hard to handle, and we need to put the cows into two different pastures. Do you think you can herd cattle?”

“I think so,” Jenny answered, but the butterflies tumbled in her stomach.

“I guess we’ll find out.”

They rode at a lope—a nice, easy gait. Jennifer eventually relaxed in the saddle, looking around her at the green pasture. It all seemed so familiar to her, as though she had never been away. When they reached the north pasture the large herd was in and Jason already had the cowboys separating them by age. He looked so in control that Jenny just sat for a moment looking at him. He was certainly at home on a ranch. Jennifer watched for a moment longer and noticed how his tough working jeans molded to the muscles in his legs, and also his white cotton shirt accentuated the dark tan of his arms. Totally transfixed, Jenny didn’t notice that Jason was looking at her, too, and she blushed when they made eye contact.

Quickly trying to cover herself, Jenny turned to Sam and asked, “How do they know the age of the cows?”

“They’re guessing, but if the cow has a young calf, you figure she’s pretty young. We’re going to help maintain the herd until they finish dividing it up. Then we’ll push the new herd into the next pasture.”

“Okay.” She followed her father’s lead, slowly approaching the herd and trying hard not to look in Jason’s direction again.

Sam told a couple of the cowboys to join Jason in cutting out the cows he wanted while they took their places.

“Oh, Jennifer, I forgot to tell you your horse is trained for cutting, so she may make sudden moves. Just grab the saddle horn, if you need to.”

She nodded, but she vowed not to do such a thing. She’d been taught without a saddle horn, and she now managed by staying alert and moving with her horse most of the time. Only a couple of times did she have to resort to grabbing the saddle horn.

“Good job, Jenny,” Sam said, riding toward her. “Let’s join the others and move the other herd.”

She followed him, not tiring yet. It had been a pleasure to work the herd. Even more, she loved hearing praise from her father. She hadn’t expected that. Several of the cowboys they joined nodded to Jennifer. She nodded in return and continued to herd. She didn’t think anyone would remember her from when she was little. Cowboys moved around a lot, and she was sure that none of the current cowboys were still the same as when she’d been at the ranch as a youngster.

“Is that little Jenny?” a voice called.

Jennifer looked around and was amazed when she saw a face she did recognize, saying in amazement, “Is that you, Buster?”

“It sure is! How are you?”

“I’m good, all the better for being back here.”

“Them are mighty fancy duds you’re wearin’,” he said, scratching his head.

Jenny blushed, knowing for certain that her outfit wasn’t right, now. “I know. It’s what I wore in New York. I don’t have any jeans.”

“You’d better get some jeans if you’re going to stick around here, girl.”

“I will, but it’s good to see you. I didn’t think Sam would still have anyone around from when I was little.”

“Yeah, I refused to run off when he was drinkin’ so heavily. I figured he’d come to his senses sooner or later.”

He continued to ride alongside her. “Were you happy in New York, Jenny?”

“No, not really, but I didn’t exactly have a choice.”

“I figured you did when you turned eighteen. That was a while back, wasn’t it?”

Jenny swallowed hard, knowing that she was going to be faced with this kind of questioning while she was staying on the ranch, but how could she explain why she hadn’t gotten in touch with her father, because the thought of him rejecting her again had been too much for her still-young heart to take. It had been her mother’s death that had finally made her realize that she was truly alone in the world and that she needed to finally move on with her life.

She turned to face the man she’d known as a young girl and smiled at him fondly. “I… I can’t explain it, Buster. But all I know is I’m glad I’m back now.”

“I’m glad, too, little Jenny. Real glad.”

Jason kept his eye on Jennifer all afternoon. She was a good horsewoman, he’d have to admit. She’d handled the mare he’d trained beautifully, not being overly aggressive or too hesitant. He’d expected her to mess up a lot more.

They hadn’t spoken for most of the day, but Jason couldn’t shake the moment they had shared when he had caught Jenny staring at him. He had seen what was in her eyes, and her quick blush had given her away. There was a lot more to this city girl than first met the eye, and even in fancy clothes, Jason had to admit she was a beautiful young woman.

When they dismounted at the end of the day, she didn’t ask for any help with her mare. After she unsaddled her, she rubbed her down before turning her out into the pasture. With a final pat, she watched the mare gallop to the other horses in the field.

“Did you enjoy riding her?” Jason asked behind her.

She whirled around. “Yes, yes, I did. Sam said you trained her. You did a good job.”

“Feel free to ride her while you’re here.”

“Thank you. That’s very generous of you.”

“No, you’re a good rider. Otherwise, I wouldn’t offer her to you. She’s a quality horse and deserves to be treated well.”

“Well, I appreciate that. Thanks.” For a moment they both just stood staring at each other. Then, without waiting for either him or Sam, she walked off back to the house.

By the time Jason and Sam got to the house, Jennifer wasn't in sight. Rachel was busy preparing dinner.

"Evening, Rachel," Sam said.

She turned and smiled at him fondly. "Good evening, Sam, Jason."

"Did Jennifer come through here?" Jason asked.

"Yes. She went to take a quick shower. You have time to take one, too, if you'd like."

An image of Jenny taking a shower flashed into Jason's mind. Quickly he shook his head to dispel it, but the heat that flared inside him was going to need some cooling down.

"Actually, a shower sounds good," Jason answered, and it was going to be nice and cold!

Jennifer changed into slacks and a blouse and drew her hair back in a ponytail. Then she headed downstairs to help Rachel prepare dinner.

Without asking, she set the table and then asked Rachel what else needed taking care of. "Put the rolls in the oven if you don't mind, honey. That should make them ready when the meal is."

"Shall I start pouring tea for everyone?"

"Yes, please. Goodness, you don't even have to ask what I need you to do, do you?" Rachel asked with a smile.

"I hope not! I can figure out setting the table and fixing drinks. I'll get used to fixing the bread, too. I guess the guys need those carbohydrates, with all the work they do."

"Yes, they do. They put in a long day. How did you manage today, by the way? Was it too hard for you?"

Jennifer looked up in surprise. "No, I had a lovely afternoon. It was so relaxing being out in the fresh air and feeling useful. And Buster is still working here! I was quite surprised."

"Yes, Buster stuck through the bad times," Rachel said.

"I'm glad."

"You're glad about what?" Sam asked as he came in the kitchen.

"I was saying I was glad to see Buster today."

"You recognized him?"

"Yes, of course. He used to help take care of me sometimes when I was little. Don't you remember?"

She knew she'd said the wrong thing, though she didn't know what exactly.

"I remember," Sam said sharply, a sudden frown on his face.

Jason walked into the kitchen at that moment and, looking at Sam, saw the dark look on his face. Immediately, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Sam told him and pulled out a chair to sit down.

Jason studied first Sam and then Jennifer. She, too, had a strange, nervous look on her face, but since neither said anything, he joined Sam at the table. He'd find out what was going on later.

"We're having T-bones tonight," Rachel announced, with a smile, trying to dispel the dark mood that had suddenly fallen across the group.

Jennifer opened the oven and took out the bread. The rolls were a golden brown. She put them in the napkin-lined basket and covered them up.

When she put the basket on the table, Rachel brought the steaks to the table, followed by a dish of broccoli covered in cheese and another salad.

"We're ready," Rachel announced.

Jennifer sat down across from Jason and her father, but remained silent. She didn't know why Sam had been upset over the mention of Buster, but something had certainly unsettled him. The last thing she wanted was to cause problems with the other cowboys on the ranch, especially when

they hadn't even sorted out their own relationship yet. Jennifer decided that she would try to talk to Rachel about it later.

Sam said the prayer and began passing the dishes around.

"How did the work go today?" Rachel asked Sam.

"Fine. We divided that herd and moved the second group to a fresh pasture."

"Jennifer rode well," Jason added.

Jennifer didn't look up. She was cutting her steak and eating. Somehow, she had to find out what had upset her father earlier, and make sure she didn't do it again. Maybe Jason would know.

"She said she'd been taking lessons for years," Rachel added.

"It showed," Jason said, which surprised Jennifer, but still she kept her head down. She liked hearing his compliments, but she knew that there was still a lot of ground to make up between them. Jason had made it clear he didn't trust her, and a day riding with him wasn't going to change that.

"Are you riding out with us in the morning?" Sam asked.

Jennifer hesitated before she said, "No, I'd like to spend some time with Rachel in the morning, if you don't mind."

"No."

No elaboration, no coaxing her to come out with them. Nothing. Just no.

No one said anything else. Once the meal was finished, Sam got up and left the kitchen without a word. Jason looked at Rachel.

"What upset Sam, Rachel?"

"I don't know. Do you, Jenny?"

"No. I just mentioned to him that I had seen Buster earlier today, and he got upset, but I didn't understand why."

"Buster? Why were you talking about him?" Rachel asked.

"He worked here when I was little. He used to babysit me when I'd ride with Sam. I was surprised to find he still worked here and just mentioned to Sam if he remembered how he used to look after me."

"Why would that upset him?" Jason asked, frowning.

"I don't know," Jennifer said, "but I wish I did."

"Okay, I'll go talk to him, it's probably nothing." Jason stood up to go.

"Wait! If...if I did say something that upset him, I didn't intend to. Please apologize to him for me."

"I think if you have upset him, you should make your own apologies," Jason said, glaring at her.

"Fine, if you figure out what went wrong, come tell me and I will apologize. I'd rather do it myself, anyway."

"Fine!" he ground out and stalked out of the kitchen.

Rachel and Jennifer began clearing the table. Jennifer sniffed a time or two, and Rachel asked, "Are you all right, Jenny?"

Jennifer took a tissue and wiped her eyes. "I'm fine."

Rachel went to the young girl and placed her hands around her shoulders. "I know it must be hard for you, honey, but you just need to give your daddy some time."

Jennifer smiled at the older woman and nodded her head. "I know that, Rachel, but we've lost so much time. Everything I say or do seems to upset somebody...I feel like I'm walking on eggshells!"

CHAPTER THREE

THE next morning whatever had upset Sam the previous evening had been forgotten. Jenny helped Rachel prepare breakfast, while Sam and Jason discussed the day's work ahead. Jennifer was glad that things seemed to be settling down, and after the men had left, she asked Rachel if she would go with her to town to purchase jeans and boots and maybe a few more things.

"Why, of course I'll go with you. I'd love to do some shopping."

"Okay. Now I know you like to have the house tidy before you leave. So I'll do the beds and get the dirty clothes so you can start the laundry."

"All right, Jenny, but you don't have to help me out, you know."

Jennifer just smiled and hurried upstairs. First, she tidied her own bedroom. Then she cautiously went into Jason's bedroom. The room was very neat, just a few dirty clothes in the laundry basket that Rachel had in each room. Jennifer stopped for a moment to look more closely at Jason's room. She could smell his masculine scent, and a prickle of electricity tingled up her spine. There were no personal effects or photographs on his side table and Jenny wondered if there was anyone special in Jason's life. She quietly closed his bedroom door and went to her father's room.

Her father's bedroom was tidy, too. But when she dusted, she found something that stopped her. There, tied around the end of her father's bedpost was a ribbon that she used to wear in her hair when she was a little girl. Jenny touched it gently, as if she could be transported back to her childhood.

He'd saved it. Her ribbon tied around his bedpost.

It was an encouraging sign that he hadn't given up on her. Instead he'd kept a ribbon from her childhood.

"I'm trying, Dad. Just give me a chance," Jenny whispered as sharp tears began to sting the backs of her eyes.

Rachel's voice interrupted her. "Jenny, are you finished?"

Jennifer grabbed her father's dirty clothes and went back downstairs to Rachel. Together they put the clothes in the laundry and started them washing.

"So, are you ready to go?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, I am. I have a lot to buy if I'm going to fit in here," Jenny answered. The ribbon had given her a ray of hope that things would be okay between her and her father, and Jenny was determined to do anything she could to make that happen.

In McAfee, they found the store Jennifer was looking for. She purchased four pairs of jeans, some boots, a cowboy hat, some shirts, socks and a jean jacket and work gloves.

"My goodness, you're buying a lot. Can you afford all this?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, I can, Rachel," Jennifer said, bringing out a credit card. "I want to be prepared for anything."

"I think you've got everything you'll possibly need."

"Me, too."

They returned home and put the men's clothes in the dryer and then added a new load of clothes consisting of her new jeans, shirts and socks.

"When those clothes are finished, you'll look like a real cowgirl," Rachel said.

"I hope so. I felt a little conspicuous out there yesterday." Jennifer closed her eyes, imagining herself dressed in her new clothes, riding on her horse. An image of Jason riding next to her flashed into her head, and she felt that same prickle of electricity she had earlier.

"Jenny? What are you doing?" Rachel asked with an amused look on her face.

Jennifer couldn't hold back a smile. "Just imagining me on my horse, looking like a real cowboy."

“Don’t forget you’re a cowgirl, not a cowboy.”

“I know, I can’t wait! Now, is there anything else I need to do in the house for you?”

“No, I think you did everything. I can do the rest of it this afternoon.”

“Ok, I guess I should go and send some e-mails then and let people know I’m okay.”

“You have friends in New York City?” Rachel asked, frowning.

“Yes, I do. I might have been lonely at home, but I didn’t live in a vacuum, you know.”

“Are you close to any of them?”

“Yes, some of them,” Jenny answered, and ducked her head. One of her “friends” was a man called Shane Packard. She’d known Shane for a long time and they had begun a relationship, but Shane had wanted more than she’d been able to offer. Jenny liked Shane, and if things had worked out differently in New York who knows what might have happened, but then her mom had died and Jenny had told him she had to go back to Oklahoma before she agreed to anything else.

“Is there anyone special back in New York?” Rachel asked.

That was a question Jenny didn’t really know the answer to. “Yes,” she said, determined to be honest. “Sort of, but I had to come here first, before I made any real decisions.”

“Why?”

“Because I believed it was important to me to find myself. For too many years I longed to return to Oklahoma. I had to find out if I had a place here, a home. I had a life in New York, but it always felt like part of me was missing. I have to give things a chance here, before I give it up for something or someone else.”

“Are you going to give it a chance, Jenny? Or are you going to have a little vacation and then go back to your old life?”

“I’m trying to find myself, Rachel. I need to know my father.”

“Don’t break his heart, Jenny,” Rachel pleaded.

“I’m not trying to,” Jenny answered, but wondered how safe her heart was, too.

Jason figured Sam was thinking about his daughter. He didn’t participate much in working the herd. In fact, at times he didn’t appear to even know there were cows in front of him.

In spite of the young woman’s behavior yesterday, Jason felt that she wouldn’t stay here long. She may have started here, but she wouldn’t stay. He was glad, because then they could get back to their normal routine, keeping the ranch showing a profit and each day just like the one before it.

Of course, that wasn’t true. Each day on the ranch was different, but at least they wouldn’t have to deal with the prodigal child. Jason knew his share in the ranch was safe. Sam wouldn’t take that away from him, but Jason was concerned about Sam; with his mental health, if nothing else. How would he handle himself if his daughter returned to New York?

She wouldn’t stay. Jason knew that. She appeared well educated, smart, but he thought she seemed to be hiding some things. She didn’t talk much, that was for sure, and it made her hard to read. He just had a feeling that she’d return to New York and big-city life just as soon as she could.

Hell! He was thinking about Jennifer a lot today, maybe just as much as Sam was. How could he not think about her? Every meal they took she sat there across from him, looking pretty in her smart clothes and big blue eyes. She was helping Rachel at every turn, and it was hard not to notice how she moved around the kitchen, elegantly and calmly, like a proper lady. It was impossible not to think about her.

Maybe he should have lunch with the cowboys in the bunkhouse. No, that wouldn’t do any good. He’d just spend his time wondering what was happening back at the ranch house and whether Jenny’s sweater brought out the color of her eyes. And, of course, Jason added, he’d be wondering whether Sam needed him.

Just then Sam called to him, interrupting his thoughts. “It’s lunchtime. Tell the guys over on the other side to head for the bunkhouse.”

Jason waved his acknowledgment. With a shout, he let the guys know and watched as they headed for the bunkhouse. They used to not break for lunch, but they decided the men would work harder for the entire day, if they took that time off.

When he reached the barn, Sam was just there ahead of him. “Do you think Jenny will ride out with us this afternoon?” Sam asked.

Jason shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know, Sam. She thinks she upset you last night. She said she just mentioned talking to Buster. Anything you want to talk about?”

Sam ran his hands over his face and looked into the distance. “I did get spooked a little when she mentioned Buster, but it had nothing to do with Jenny. She asked me if I remembered him taking care of her when she was a little girl. Like I could ever forget. I remember everything about her being on the ranch, Jason, and her being here now just makes me think about that time all the more.”

Jason looked at Sam and could see the turmoil the man was going through. He knew there was still a lot to sort out between him and Jennifer, despite his misgivings about the woman. He continued, “Well, I heard that she and Rachel were going to go shopping this morning. Maybe she enjoyed that too much to want to go out this afternoon.”

“Shopping? In McAfee?”

“Doesn’t compare to New York City, I know, but she might be having withdrawal symptoms. Or maybe they went to Oklahoma City to shop.”

“Well if they did go to Oklahoma City, they won’t be home for lunch, so riding will probably be out.”

All Jason could think about was Jennifer shopping until she dropped in Oklahoma City. At least her city ways would let Sam know that she couldn’t adjust to living on the ranch again.

When they eventually got back to the ranch, Jennifer’s rental car was in its place, which told them she was either back or she’d found another way to reach good shopping.

Jason still held out hope that she’d leave the ranch behind, but there she was, perfectly at home in the kitchen with Rachel. But this time there was a big difference. Looking at Sam, Jason knew they were both in trouble with Jennifer’s new appearance. She was wearing well-fitted jeans, a plaid shirt, much like his own and cowboy boots. She was a cowboy’s dream.

Jason cleared his throat.

Sam broke the silence. “I see you did some shopping.”

“Yes, I did. I didn’t want to embarrass you all this afternoon...if I can ride with you again.”

She was still helping Rachel get lunch on the table. She moved around the kitchen, knowing instinctively where everything was as if she’d lived here all her life, which was even more surprising to Jason.

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