



SUPER ROMANCE

Cowgirl in High Heels

JEANNIE WATT

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«HarperCollins»

Watt J.

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Her luck's changing for the better...right? Making the tough decisions has always been easy for big-city human resources specialist Ellison Hunter...until a surprise pregnancy changes everything. Now it's her life that needs major reorganization. Putting her personnel expertise to use on her family's Montana ranch is the perfect escape—even if it means contending with ace rancher Ryan Madison. His stubborn pride and loyalty to the staff? Those she can handle. But his sexy grin, cowboy charm and instinct to protect her and her baby catch her off guard. As attraction spins into something more, Ellie finds herself even further out of her element. But maybe, with Ryan, she's exactly where she belongs.

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He wanted to touch her

Ellie could sense it. And worse yet, she felt the same, as if a wall had fallen away and she'd realized it was possible to touch.

Dear heaven, how she wanted to. She wanted to step closer, take Ryan's face in her hands and kiss him. Softly the first time, hard and deep the second time. To find out what all those lean muscles felt like under her fingers. She wanted to wrap herself around him, experience what this cowboy had to offer and for one brief moment just feel and not think.

But it wasn't possible. That was what had gotten her into this situation, and she'd been stupid to let herself meander along this path. She was pregnant. She was leaving. She couldn't toy around with this guy—it wasn't fair to either one of them.

Ellison stepped back.

Dear Reader,

Have you ever heard the saying that life is what happens while you're making other plans? Well, life happens to Ellison Hunter in a big way when she discovers she's pregnant and that the father of her child is not the guy she thought he was. All of her carefully crafted plans disintegrate, and the next thing she knows, she's in Montana, on a ranch, dealing with cows and cowboys and a lifestyle that's utterly foreign to her. Ellie isn't wild about unfamiliar environments, but now that she's there, she's determined to make the best of it, for both herself and her baby.

Enter my cowboy hero who's too busy to make plans. He takes what life tosses him and deals with it—and he wants to help Ellie deal with her problems, too, but Ellie's not ready to depend on anyone. Not now...maybe not ever.

I've made a few plans over the years that got knocked off track by life happening—like, say, the time I was supposed to go to Washington, D.C., as an intern and instead met and married my husband. I never saw that coming and I've never regretted the rapid career change that ensued. Funny how life works out.

I hope you enjoy reading about Ellie and Ryan as much as I enjoyed writing the story. Please visit my website at www.jeannie watt.com, or contact me at jeannie writes@gmail.com. You can also follow my adventures sewing vintage clothing at retrosewingromance.blogspot.com.

Happy reading,

Jeannie Watt

Cowgirl in High Heels

Jeannie Watt



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeannie Watt lives in the heart of rural Nevada in a historic ranching community. When she's not at the computer writing, she collects and sews vintage clothing patterns—her new obsession—and makes mosaic mirrors. Every now and again she and her husband slip away to San Francisco to run a 10K and soak up the city, but for the most part she enjoys living in her quiet desert setting, thinking up new ways to torture her characters before they reach their happily ever after.

To Gail Thompson.

Thanks for all the great years working together.

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CHAPTER ONE

SHE WOULDN'T NEED black pumps on a ranch...would she?

Ellison Hunter hesitated for only a moment before she tucked her trusty Christian Louboutin shoes, toes stuffed with the original tissue, into their usual spot in her travel bag. She had no idea what she'd be facing in Montana, but would hate to need her pumps and be without. These particular heels, a splurge she'd never regretted, gave her a sense of power and control, which was exactly what Ellie needed right now.

The phone rang for the third time in the past two hours as she reached for a stack of underwear to tuck into the spaces around the heels and Ellie considered ignoring it—except that an unanswered call would eventually be followed by a rapping on her door. So much for control and power.

"Montana?" Kate Warren asked without saying hello. Ellie's closest friend was well aware that Ellie was holding out on her, that she hadn't divulged the true reason for her abrupt departure from her job and an impromptu trip across the country for an undetermined length of time. And Ellie wasn't going to spill her guts anytime soon because she was still coming to terms with the reason herself.

"My uncle needs me," she said.

"But...Montana?"

"It's where he lives," Ellie replied patiently, although she felt her back start to go up. Her usual calm demeanor was getting harder to maintain with each passing day.

"No," Kate said. "He lives in Santa Barbara, and I could understand you going to help him there, but—"

“A surgical practice doesn’t prepare you to manage people.” Which was what Ellie did. She managed people. Helped organizations run more smoothly by evaluating their personnel and their practices. Up until two months ago, her life had mirrored her profession—it had run smoothly, according to plan.

And now...

Ellie scrunched up her forehead as she balanced the phone on her shoulder and reached for more underwear. Think about it later.

“Ellie, I know you’re dealing with some kind of a problem,” Kate blurted. “And I think it’s totally unfair of you not to let me help—”

“I’m fine,” Ellie snapped and then let out a sigh. Not fine. “Okay...I need to get away.” That was the truth. “I...need a break. When I talked to my aunt and she told me that the ranch Uncle Milo bought was about fifty years behind the times... Well, it seemed like a good opportunity to change scenery and help them out at the same time.”

A long silence met her words. Kate had known Ellie since they’d first been assigned as bunkmates at boarding school seventeen years ago. Changing scenery was not something Ellie had ever been concerned with.

“Ellie...” There was a soft note of desperation in her friend’s voice, one that made Ellie come very close to confessing.

Not yet. Not until she had some kind of plan in place. Not until she’d come to terms with everything. Telling her aunt the truth had been ridiculously difficult, and she was not ready to repeat the experience. And then there was always the chance that she wouldn’t have to confess—which was why she hadn’t yet told her mother.

You’re only six weeks along. Sometimes...things...happen.

Her aunt’s words had given her a smidgeon of comfort two weeks ago when she’d simply had to tell someone the devastating news. How horrible was she that she kind of hoped something would happen? That the pregnancy would end itself naturally before the first trimester; that she could go back to her old life and never, ever make a mistake like this again?

Really horrible.

So she had that to deal with, too.

“Kate...my decision is made. I’m going to Montana. It’s what I want to do.”

“I don’t believe you,” Kate replied. “Quitting your job, moving to a foreign environment, holding out on your best friend.... You don’t have a dreaded disease, do you?”

“No disease. Just a need for a change. And some privacy.”

Kate sighed into the phone. “All right,” she said sullenly. “Go to Montana. Keep me in the dark.”

“It isn’t like I won’t be back,” Ellie said, relieved that her friend was finally showing signs of backing off. “I have to finish packing. I’m running late and I won’t make my flight if I have to keep answering calls.”

“No more calls.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s okay.”

Her words were followed by an awkward silence as if they were both waiting for the other to hang up first, and then Kate said, “You know I have your back.”

“You always have,” Ellie replied, forcing the words over the lump forming in her throat. Stupid hormone-induced emotions. “I’ll talk to you soon.” And then she did hang up. Fast.

For a moment she stared down at her suitcase, blinking against the tears, before she regained control and started packing again, her movements quick and automatic.

Her new job was bogus—or at least it had started out that way. When her aunt had first suggested that Ellie go to work for them at their new ranch in Montana, her initial instinct had been to say no. It had been more than obvious that Angela was trumping up a way to rescue her niece from

the consequences of her actions—something Ellie’s own mother would have never done. Besides, Milo had a ranch consultant coming in later that summer to evaluate, so why would he need her? Easy answer. He didn’t.

But for the first time in her life Ellie had no plan, no idea what her next move would or should be. After several days of considering her alternatives—paying rent from savings while she looked for another job in a tight market, trying to find a position that would work with single motherhood, coming to terms with her pregnancy—she’d realized that she was damned fortunate to have this opportunity. It gave her time, although she hated admitting she needed that time.

So three days ago she’d called her uncle Milo and hammered out a deal. She’d travel to Montana and familiarize herself with the ranch, which was still being managed by the original owner, before the consultant arrived. Milo had seemed relieved, saying that while the consultant came highly recommended, he’d feel better if he had another set of eyes there—Ellie’s eyes. The person he was most concerned about was the former owner, now the uncommunicative ranch manager. On the one hand, he didn’t want to let the guy go if he was the best man to run the place, but on the other, the guy was hell to deal with.

Ellie assured Milo she’d take care of matters. That was what she did, after all—take care of matters, evaluate staff, make hiring and firing decisions. Between her and the consultant, they should have the ranch in decent shape by the time Milo retired.

She closed her suitcase and locked the latches. This was not going to be an escape. It was going to be a mission.

* * *

THE ARENA WAS muddy as hell. Ryan Madison shook out his loop, found the sweet spot and gripped it tightly as he urged his black gelding, PJ, into the roping box.

“Come on, Ryan. You can do it!” A female voice broke through his concentration, but he instantly tuned her out.

Focus.

PJ’s body tensed as the calf was pushed forward into position. Ryan sent up a quick prayer, then nodded. The chute clanged open, the calf shot out and after that it was autopilot.

PJ caught up with the calf and squeezed in on him as Ryan dropped the loop over the animal’s neck and dallied around the saddle horn, dismounting almost before PJ had skidded to a stop in the mud. He flanked the calf, a heavy, squirming heifer, dodging a foot as the calf hit the ground before grabbing that same foot, holding it with the two front feet with one hand and making his wraps with the other. Two wraps and a half hitch.

Ryan jumped to his feet, hands in the air. PJ eased forward, slacking the rope stretched between the saddle horn and the calf. He held his breath as the calf squirmed and bucked, and then the judge dropped his flag.

Ryan bent to loosen the rope on the calf’s neck before releasing the animal’s feet from the wraps of the pigging string. The calf jumped up and loped to the far end of the arena as Ryan remounted the gelding, coiling his muddy rope.

He was vaguely aware of the announcer giving his time—the best that day so far—and cheers from the crowd as he exited the arena; he nodded at some of his acquaintances. Smiled even though he didn’t feel like smiling, despite a decent run.

Somewhere in the warm-up crowd was his half brother, Matt Montoya, who had every intention of stealing this purse away from him.

Have at it, Ryan thought as he rode through the crowd and then headed for his trailer. His run had been pretty damned close to perfect, especially in a muddy arena.

Once at the trailer, he tied PJ and pulled the saddle off. The horse was done for the day, but Ryan wasn’t. He had a mission ahead of him that he was not looking forward to, but one that couldn’t be avoided. He needed to talk to his father.

It was a good-size rodeo, but Charles Montoya tended to show up in the competitor's area to congratulate his legitimate son after a good run. Ryan had purposely parked his trailer within sight of his brother's, although under normal circumstances, they avoided any proximity with one another. In fact, they'd never actually spoken since the fistfight in the rodeo grounds' bathroom just after he'd turned fifteen.

After PJ was taken care of, Ryan sat on the trailer fender where he had a decent view of Montoya's trailer, and began his vigil. Matt would make his run within the hour and then, hopefully—
Score.

Charles Montoya was a tall man with a full head of silver hair. Hard to miss in a crowd, and even harder to miss as he headed for Matt's trailer. Ryan, vaguely aware of his heart rate bumping up, just as it did when he was about to rope, pushed off the trailer and started toward the man who, after finding Matt's trailer deserted, reversed course toward the stands. Ryan knew he probably wasn't going to have another semiprivate opportunity such as this anytime in the near future, so he started to jog after him.

"Excuse me," he called, when he really wanted to say, "Hold up, asshole."

Charles Montoya stopped walking and glanced over his shoulder, a stunned expression forming on his face when he recognized just who had hailed him.

Yeah. It's me. Surprised?

Ryan's mouth clamped into a hard straight line as he slowed to a walk, and damned if Charles didn't take on a polite, distant expression.

"Can I help you?" he said.

"Yes, you can. Stay away from my mother," Ryan said as he came to a stop.

"Excuse me?"

And this was when the bluff came in, because although he knew from Cindy, his mother's best friend, that Charles had been in contact with his mom—and that she'd been in a deep funk for days afterward—he didn't know the nuts and bolts of the situation. As always, Lydia Madison was protecting people. Ryan. Charles. Everyone but herself.

Ryan took a step forward, putting himself close enough to his father that the guy knew he meant business. "Leave my mother alone. No contact. Understand?"

A fierce frown formed between Charles's heavy white eyebrows. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't bullshit me. You called her, you threatened her, and if you do it again, the era of 'don't ask, don't tell' is over. Forever."

Charles drew himself up in a way that told Ryan he wasn't used to being challenged. Tough shit.

"Don't threaten me," he rumbled.

"Or?" Ryan asked calmly. "You'll tell the world the truth?"

The older man's face went brilliantly red and then, apparently unable to find a reply, he turned on his heel and stalked toward the stands. He'd made it only a few steps before he stopped dead in his tracks.

Ryan's first thought was, What the hell? But he quickly saw exactly what had brought his father to a screeching halt. The golden son, Matt, stood about fifteen yards away, blocking Charles's escape between two trailers.

Cool. A twisted family reunion.

Ryan started walking before he had a chance to think things through. He had a few words for his brother, too. Matt also moved forward, while Charles stayed planted, one son approaching from the front, one from the rear. Trapped.

Matt's face was a blank mask when he stopped in front of his father, his gaze raking quickly over the old man's face before moving on to Ryan.

“I was just explaining to your father how much his recent phone call to my mom had upset her,” Ryan said.

If he’d had any question as to whether or not Matt would automatically back his father, it was answered when his brother shot Charles a fiercely angry look.

“If it happens again,” Ryan continued, “I’ll make a call of my own.” If his mother was being harassed, then Montoya’s mother could join the fray.

“Do that,” Matt growled, “and I’ll beat the shit out of you.”

“Or try?” Ryan asked flatly before he turned his attention back to Charles, who appeared to be on the verge of a stroke, he was so red. “No more calls, you son of a bitch. Leave her alone.”

Then, having had all the family reunion he could handle for one day, he turned and stalked back toward his trailer. Neither Montoya followed him. Good thing.

He loaded PJ, locked the tack compartment, pocketed his keys. Now that his mission was accomplished, he had to stop by the rodeo office and then grab a hamburger for the road before he put a couple hundred miles between himself and his old man. If he could choke a burger down. Talk about a bad taste.

“Great run, Ryan!” a young voice called as he approached the rodeo office.

Ryan smiled and nodded at the boy dressed in chaps and carrying a red, white and blue rope. “Thanks, bud.”

He conducted his business in the rodeo office, which took about fifteen minutes longer than it should have, and got into the concession line.

People stopped and said hello as he waited, congratulating him on his run—still the winning time—and Ryan chatted with a few of them even though he wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of there. He’d just made it to the counter and was about to give his order when a collective gasp went up from the crowd, followed by silence. The nasty kind of silence that indicated something bad had just happened. Ryan’s gut tightened as he waited for the hubbub that would erupt when the injured cowboy got back to his feet. The crowd remained stubbornly silent.

“Oh, no,” the elderly lady in the booth gasped, craning her neck to see, but the solid gate panels blocked the view.

“Our medical team is on the scene, taking a look at this cowboy,” the announcer finally said in a reassuring voice. “As you know, these guys are the best in the business.” The ambulance rolled past the concession stand then, and the wide arena gate swung open to give access. The lady gasped again and Ryan instantly understood why.

The sorrel horse with the distinctive white spot on his side standing near the crouched group surrounding the downed cowboy belonged to the crowd favorite.

His brother. Matt Montoya.

* * *

JUST WHEN ELLIE was beginning to think the dusty single-track road was never going to end, she rounded a corner and a rustic ranch spread out in front of her in postcardlike perfection. She pulled her leased Land Rover to a halt, taking in the large red barn and several smaller outbuildings on the edge of green fields. The single-story, shake-roofed house with a porch surrounding it on three sides nestled close to a stand of evergreen trees. Cows and horses grazed in the pastures and a pair of large birds flew in lazy circles over the pond at the edge of one of the fields.

Milo had bought the place eight months ago and since then had spent a grand total of one week there, shortly after the purchase, but didn’t seem to be able to stop talking about “his ranch” to anyone who would listen. Now Ellie understood why. It was gorgeous.

Gorgeous and really, really close.

After fifteen hours of travel Ellie was more than ready for a hot bath and a bed. Ten minutes later she parked at the end of the flagstone walk, not liking the fact that the place felt as deserted

up close as it had appeared from a distance. Had Angela or Milo told the staff she'd be arriving? A question Ellie hadn't thought to ask. Ellie, who always thought of everything.

She'd been rattled lately. Disorganized. Not herself.

Ellie rang the bell. After the second ring she knocked, then, after a suitable amount of time, tried the handle. Locked. Okay. She set down her handbag and stood for a moment, hands on hips, surveying the ranch, watching for some sign of movement around the barn and outbuildings. Nothing.

Great. Her feet hurt and the small of her back ached from sitting for too long and she wanted to get inside. Now.

She started walking around the house, her heels clunking hollowly on the wooden porch, looking for another way in and wondering if she was going to have to call Angela to get the number of the caretaker. She tried the side entrance, the back entrance, the sliding door. No luck. She'd just pulled her phone from her jacket pocket when she heard the sound of an engine.

Salvation.

Ellie rounded the corner of the house in time to see a woman with long dark hair scramble out of the open Jeep.

"Miss Bradworth?" she called as she strode up the walk, her long flannel shirt flapping loosely over very worn jeans.

"Hunter," Ellie called back. "Mrs. Bradworth is my aunt."

"Oh." The woman quickly crossed the distance between them, taking the porch steps two at a time. "Sorry about the wait. I didn't know you were coming until half an hour ago."

"Really?" How was that possible?

The woman held out a wad of keys and then, after Ellie automatically took them, shoved her hands into her back pockets. "I was in town when Walt called and got here as quickly as I could. I hope you haven't waited for too long."

There was nothing about the woman's tone that was impolite, but there was nothing that was particularly friendly, either. Ellie felt rather like an interloper. Well, she was an interloper related to the owner of this place.

"Thanks for hurrying," Ellie said, holding out her free hand. "Ms...."

"Garcia. Jessie Garcia." Jessie met her gaze directly as they shook hands and Ellie was struck by how really gorgeous the woman was, with high cheekbones and amazing dark eyes.

"I'm Ellison Hunter. Milo and Angela's niece."

"Will you be staying long?"

"My stay is open-ended."

Jessie pulled her mouth into a polite smile, yet Ellie sensed she was not pleased with the answer. Why?

Probably because life was easier when the staff had the place to themselves.

"I hope you enjoy your time here," Jessie said coolly.

"I'm sure I will."

"There's no fresh food in the house, but you should be able to find some things in the freezer and pantry."

"Thanks."

Jessie smiled slightly then started back down the steps.

"Excuse me," Ellie called, waiting for the woman to turn back before she said, "How can I get hold of Mr. Feldman?"

"Walt?" A shadow crossed Jessie's face. "It's Sunday."

"Yes."

"It's his day off."

"I see. And after that?"

"I'll have him give you a call. Okay?"

“Thank you.”

Ellie had the distinct impression that Jessie wanted to escape and was getting annoyed at the prolonged conversation, but her tone was courteous when she said, “Anything else?”

I want to meet with the staff.... But she’d pass that along through Mr. Feldman when they got a chance to talk. “Not right now.”

“Well, have a good one.”

The woman climbed into the Jeep. It coughed once, then the engine caught and roared to life. Jessie raised a hand then turned the Jeep into a tight U and sped back down the road in the direction from which she’d come.

Ellie held up the ring of nine keys, frowned a little and then picked one at random. Surprisingly, it slid into the lock and the mechanism clicked open. A bed and a bath awaited.

Maybe her luck was changing for the better.

CHAPTER TWO

RYAN HAD HAD his share of knocks in life, but he was having a hard time recalling a day where he’d had two big emotional wallops back-to-back like this.

Right now he had no idea where his father was, what he was doing or thinking or planning—although it had better not involve his mother—but he knew exactly where his brother was: lying in a hospital with a career-ending crushed leg. Ryan was more shaken by the accident than he wanted to admit.

For almost two decades, Matt had been his fiercest roping competition, and for fifteen of those years, he’d known they were half brothers, thanks to a painful heart-to-heart with his mother after that fistfight in the rodeo grounds’ john. That conversation had explained why Matt hated him so much—because he existed.

Well, Ryan was pissed at the situation himself. They shared a father, but Matt had been the son with a father in residence. Matt had been the son with the fancy horses and trucks and trailers. He’d enjoyed the kind of easy, charmed career that money made possible—right up until a few hours ago when that charmed career had come to a screeching halt, leaving the way wide open for Ryan to take his place in the National Finals.

Ryan didn’t feel good about that at all. The short visit to his highly doped-up brother in the hospital before he’d started the drive home hadn’t helped. All Matt had been concerned about was that Ryan not call his mother.

As if.

He needed a tall beer and about ten hours of sleep. Then maybe he’d be in better condition to deal with all the shit that had gone down today.

He turned down the two-mile-long driveway leading to the Rocky View Ranch, where he’d lived and worked since graduating high school. At one time, back in his great-grandfather’s day, the ranch had encompassed more than two sections and employed a dozen people. Most of the hands had lived in the bunkhouse, but there were two staff houses with their own corrals and outbuildings located half a mile from the main house, which gave the residents some privacy. The ranch manager and his family had lived in one house and the rural schoolteacher had stayed in the other for nine months out of the year.

Now the ranch was smaller by a section, the school had been bulldozed thirty years ago, and Ryan’s friends and coworkers, Jessie and Francisco Garcia, lived in the schoolteacher’s house. Walt Feldman, who’d owned the place up until a year ago, lived in the manager’s place next door. Most of the time, he was okay with that.

Most of the time.

Ryan still lived in the small three-room homestead house behind the barn on the main ranch that he’d moved into the week after graduating college with his degree in range management. It was hot in summer, cold in winter, way too cramped and right now he wanted to get there like nobody’s business.

Jessie and Francisco's place came into view, lit to the max. Walt's house, an eighth of a mile away, was dark. Ryan had barely registered how much he didn't like that when Jessie stepped out of her house and waved frantically at him before trotting down the steps as he slowed to a stop.

"We have a problem," she said as soon as he rolled the window down. "One of the family is at the house. She came this afternoon. Walt didn't even tell me until she was already on the property. He called me from town and I was lucky to get the keys down to her."

Well, shit.

"Do I need to go looking for him?" he asked.

Jessie shook her head. "Francisco called just a few minutes ago. No surprise that he found him in a bar, but I'm afraid if he brings him back here, Walt might try to go to the house. Scare the lady...get himself fired."

Ryan pressed his fingertips to his forehead. It'd been one long friggin day and he'd been looking forward to that beer and some sleep.

"All right," he said just as a loud "Ma-a-a" sounded from inside the small house. Jessie ignored her son's plaintive call, her dark eyes holding on Ryan's face as she waited for him to tell her how they'd handle the situation. One thing was for certain: he didn't want Walt anywhere near the main house while he was drunk. Sometimes Walt didn't remember who owned the place—or that he'd basically been sold with the ranch, along with the rest of them. Once, Ryan had found him asleep in the master bedroom after one of his benders. That would never do while the family was in residence.

"Ma-a-a!" Four-year-old Jeffrey stepped out onto the porch holding his bear by one ear. "I need you!"

"Sounds like you're needed," Ryan said as Bella and Emmie toddled out onto the porch behind their brother, one taking hold of Jeff's bear, the other his shirtsleeve, before they simultaneously put their thumbs in their mouths. "I'll take care of things and see that Francisco gets back home."

"Thanks, Ry. It's bath night."

Jessie stepped back and Ryan put the truck into low gear, easing the horse trailer forward as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. He punched the number three with his thumb and Francisco answered almost immediately.

"Found him."

"Drive him to my mom's," Ryan said. Lydia would keep Walt contained until he sobered up. "I'll take it from there."

"If I can get him into the truck. He can barely walk."

"Want me to call Mitch?" Ryan asked. His bull-riding friend had helped contain Walt on a previous occasion.

"I'll get someone here at the bar to help me."

"All right," Ryan said. "Let me know if you have any trouble." As soon as he hung up, he punched his mother's number and explained the situation.

Lydia Madison responded with a heavy sigh, which Ryan read more as resignation than annoyance. "The extra room's ready for him."

"Want me to come back to town, help you with him? He's upset about the new owners coming to stay at his house."

"Get some sleep," Lydia said. "He'll be okay in the morning. I'll feed him some ham and eggs, keep him here until you or Francisco can come and get him."

"I'll see you then," Ryan replied. "Thanks, Mom."

"Get some sleep!"

He'd do his best because tomorrow was probably going to be one hell of a day. The owners would undoubtedly want to talk to Walt—they always did—and Ryan needed to make sure the guy was in decent shape for the meeting, which was never an easy task.

The hell of it was that he had no idea how long the owners planned to stay, and he was only going to be on the ranch for a few days before he had to leave again for the next rodeo halfway across the state. He didn't want to add more to Jessie and Francisco's workload, but the chances of Walt coming to terms with his demons by the weekend bordered on nonexistent.

Sometimes he wondered if the old man was ever going to get over having to sell the ranch. Would ever forgive himself for overextending, borrowing recklessly and then having it all come crashing down on him during a perfect storm of drought, wildfire and recession.

Enter the rich people.

If there'd been any way for Walt to support himself other than staying on as manager, Ryan would have quit and gone with him. But no one wanted to take on a seventy-year-old cowboy who'd lived on only one property for his entire life—a guy whose management methods had been behind the times until recently, which hadn't helped when he'd started to get into trouble.

Walt blamed only the times.

Ryan never argued with him, though he had cause. Walt had been the closest thing to a real father he'd had.

Ryan rounded the last corner before the main house and, sure enough, the lights were on...seemingly all of the lights. The house was long and low, with a roofed porch on three sides. Walt's grandfather had built the place and his father had added on. It was spacious and comfortable and Walt had always been so proud of his house—so of course Mrs. Bradworth had plans to gut the place before they took up permanent residence.

If they took up permanent residence. And lasted. Most rich transplants stayed an average of five years before the brutal Montana winters convinced them to use their hobby ranches as summer getaways and hunting camps.

Ryan rolled to a stop next to the barn. He'd already grained PJ and rubbed him down before starting the long trip home, so all he had to do was unload him and put him out into the pasture with his buddies before collapsing onto the sofa with a beer. Maybe get that sleep his mom had spoken of.

Ryan waved the horses back and led the big gelding through the gate and released him. PJ put his nose down, blew at the grass then ambled off as Ryan coiled the lead rope.

Normally he would have left the truck right where he'd parked it, but not tonight. The Bradworths had requested that there be no parked equipment in sight while they were in residence, and since Mrs. Bradworth was a bit of a stickler for rules, he didn't want to do anything to set her off—even if he'd probably have the truck moved by the time she rolled out of bed. During the week they'd stayed, shortly after purchasing the place and saving Walt's financial ass, he'd never known them to show signs of life before 9:00 a.m.

Ryan parked behind the barn, with only the nose of his truck offending the Bradworths' view. He walked toward his dark house, his steps slowing before mounting the one step leading onto his porch as he caught sight of a shadow moving across the curtained bay window of the main house. A second later the shadow, obviously female, crossed again, going in the opposite direction.

Ryan stopped at his porch and stood, the rope and halter hanging from one hand, watching as the shadow moved back and forth. Back and forth.

He had a bad feeling about this.

A pacing woman was never a good sign.

* * *

THE SOUND OF the engine, followed a few minutes later by the hollow clang of a metal horse-trailer door opening, had come as a welcome relief after hours of silence. Less than five minutes after the truck had pulled in, the night was once again quiet, but Ellie felt better knowing that there was another human being within shouting range. She'd thought she'd been prepared for isolation when she'd embarked on this trip, but she hadn't realized just how isolated she would feel in the big house surrounded by nothing but trees and fields and strange noises. The satellite TV wasn't hooked up yet,

so she had nothing to watch. The internet service was also disconnected, and her phone only worked in certain parts of the house.

Alone.

With her thoughts.

But worse than being alone, she felt disoriented. Unfocused. The only other time in her life when she'd felt this unsettled had been when her mother had dropped her off at boarding school with the clipped assurance that she'd like it there and she would make friends. Her mother had been right. She'd met Kate and bonded within a matter of days, but here she didn't foresee any bonding occurring—not unless Jessie Garcia turned out to be a lot friendlier than she first appeared.

You didn't come to the ranch to bond. You came to get a grip.

But here she was in her new sanctuary, where she'd assumed that the peace of the surroundings, the distance between her and Nick—the now happily married father of her baby—would give her some perspective, yet she felt exactly the same in a different environment. Angry, scared, unfocused.

The situation still seemed unreal. And the baby who had so disrupted her life seemed equally unreal. So far she'd had no symptoms of pregnancy other than sore breasts, but she'd been assured that the baby was real by trained medical personnel. Twice.

When would it feel real?

Soon, she assured herself. Everything would fall into place and she'd know what to do. She just had to acclimate to her new surroundings and then make a plan. Once she had a plan, she would feel better. More grounded and able to make decisions about the next steps in her life.

But her brain wasn't listening and her thoughts continued to tumble over one another.

When she couldn't focus, Ellie moved, but there was no treadmill at the ranch, so she couldn't run until she was exhausted as she'd sometimes done in her town house when work pressures got to her. She ended up walking the floor, focusing on making slow, even steps, clearing her mind, ordering her thoughts.

The house was sparsely furnished, so pacing was easy—she probably could have jogged if she'd wanted to. When Milo had bought the ranch, the owner had become the manager and had moved his belongings to the small staff house that Ellie had passed on her drive in. Angela had bought some bare-bones furniture to see them through their first visit—bare bones to Angela anyway: two expensive leather chairs, a pecan dining-room set, a bureau and a bed with a wrought-iron headboard for each bedroom. Most of the linens were still in their original wrappers and the towels had price tags on them. Angela was no cook, so the kitchen was also bare bones—to the point that Ellie wondered how'd they'd eaten during their stay. There was, after all, no takeout close by.

Earlier in the day Ellie had busied herself making the bed, taking an inventory of her food supply, familiarizing herself with her deserted surroundings, although she didn't stray too far from the house and its untended yards. Frankly, she'd expected the house to be prepared for her when she arrived—and was certain that Angela had, too—but something had gone awry. She could live with that. People made mistakes. The lack of communication between Mr. Feldman and Jessie might have an easy explanation. She hoped it did. There was still no ranch staff to be found, but as Jessie had said, it was Sunday.

After eating a dinner of canned soup, she'd tackled the office, the one place that had been left fairly intact after the owner had moved out, hoping to find employment records that Milo had thought might be there—or any records that she understood—to help fill the evening hours. No luck. And then once night had fallen, she'd pulled the curtains and sat in one of the leather chairs and stared out across the room. The silence had almost hurt her ears. She'd tried reading on her phone; listening to music. Nothing helped with the thoughts jumbling on top of one another, so finally she'd resorted to pacing.

She preferred running—toward a goal if possible. And that was the problem. Until she had a goal, a written plan, she wouldn't be able to relax.

So instead she continued pacing, trying to order her thoughts.

Ellie didn't know what time she'd finally crawled into bed and fallen asleep, but she did know what time she woke: nine o'clock on the nose, when her phone rang. She rolled over in her unfamiliar bed to answer it.

"Hello, Ellie? How are you finding Montana?" her aunt inquired in her languid voice.

"So far, so good." Ellie lay back against the pillows and pushed her hair away from her forehead with one hand.

"Have you talked to your mother yet?" Which was code for, Have you told her you're pregnant?

"Not recently." Nothing new there. She'd traveled the globe without much contact with her mother, and vice versa. She was actually closer to her aunt, which was rather sad, considering the fact that Angela wasn't going to win any Mother of the Year awards herself. But she was slightly less self-centered than her sister.

"What do you think of the house?"

"It's...rustic," Ellie said, feeling it best not to mention that she'd found herself unable to imagine either her aunt or her uncle living there.

"I know," Angela said on a groan. "I have some work ahead of me. Sorry about the lack of furniture."

"There's enough for me," Ellie said. "By the way, I can't find the employment records."

"They should be there...somewhere," Angela said absently, telling Ellie exactly how important such things were to her.

"I can't find the employees, either."

"Really? Then who's running the ranch?"

"Good question." Ellie rubbed her fingertips over her forehead. "Do you have any idea what's involved in running a ranch?" She was curious whether Angela had any inkling at all, or if they were both equally clueless.

"No idea. This is Milo's baby." Angela spoke with tolerant affection and, indeed, she was devoted to her husband, who in return showed his love by giving her everything she wanted.

That said, Angela hadn't been all that broken up about her husband's retirement being delayed after he'd been named chief of staff three months ago, and Ellie understood why. Angela did not have a rural bone in her body. Milo, on the other hand, had appeared torn between accepting the job he'd always wanted and retiring to his ranch to take over operations. Ultimately, though, he chose the job he'd been striving for his entire career—and therein lay the rub.

There were a lot of unknowns about the Rocky View Ranch that needed to be addressed. Such as could it be more profitable? Was it being run well? Her uncle had put off getting immediate answers to those questions, leaving the existing management in place after the purchase, thinking he'd be there within a year to observe operations and make decisions. But now things had changed, and that was where both Ellie and the consultant came in.

"Milo's baby is beautiful," she said to her aunt with a slight smile. "I'll find out what I can about operations, fill him in." This was not her field of expertise, but employees were employees and efficiency was efficiency. And until she figured out her next steps in life, she'd have plenty of opportunity to observe.

"Exactly what we wanted, dear. You really are doing us a favor."

Ha. They were doing her the favor. Ellie was about to say something to that effect when the back door rattled, startling her.

"There's someone at the door," Ellie said.

"Maybe one of your lost employees."

"Maybe," Ellie said. "I'll talk to you later." She set the phone on the table as she passed through the kitchen to the back door, which rattled again as the tall dark-headed kid who stood outside knocked.

“Jessie wanted me to bring you this,” the boy said, holding out a box. Ellie automatically took it, noting that the bottom was warm just before the spicy pumpkin scent hit her nostrils full force and made her stomach roil. “It’s a pie,” he added helpfully.

“Thank you,” Ellie said, looking around for a place to set the box out of olfactory range. “I’ll, uh, just put it in the fridge.”

“It’s warm. Jessie says it’ll do something funny if you put it in the fridge before it cools.”

“Okay, then,” Ellie said, setting the pie on the counter as she tried to gain control over her stomach. “I’m Ellison Hunter.”

“Nice to meet you,” the boy said as if by rote. Someone had taught him manners.

“And you are?”

“Oh. I’m Lonnie. I live one place over.”

Well, that explained nothing. “Do you know where Mr. Feldman is?” she asked, noticing that the truck that had been parked next to the small house was now gone, although the long horse trailer was still there.

“No.”

“How about Mr. Madison?”

“Ryan? He’s probably gone.” The kid kicked at the step, looking as if he wanted to escape. Not yet. “Gone, as in...”

“He had a rodeo this weekend,” the kid said as if that answered everything.

“How long does the rodeo last?”

“His part?” The boy screwed up his face. “Only a day usually, but it’s a long drive home.”

It was Monday. A workday in her book. Perhaps the employees worked flex time. Ellie had no way of knowing, since there appeared to be no records on the ranch other than a file folder with tax information.

“Great. Well—” she held out a hand “—it’s good to meet you.”

The kid grabbed her extended hand, pumped it once, hard, then released it. Ellie smiled briefly, waiting until the kid had started down the steps to the all-terrain vehicle parked near the front gate before rubbing her hands together to get the feeling back into the one he’d just crushed. The kid was almost to the bottom of the walk when he turned. “Hey, you might want to keep an eye out for Hiss.”

“Hiss?”

“He catches mice. He’s harmless.”

“Hiss is a cat?” Ellie asked, wondering why she needed to keep an eye out for it.

“A snake,” Lonnie called, then with a cheerful wave got on his ATV and started the motor.

“Great,” Ellie muttered. “Thanks.” Mr. Madison was at the rodeo, Mr. Feldman was nowhere to be found and she needed to watch out for Hiss the snake. She couldn’t say she was overly impressed with Milo’s ranch operations so far.

Ellie stepped back into the kitchen, then instantly turned toward fresh air as the pumpkin smell hit her. Taking a deep breath and holding it, she went inside, picked up the box with the pie and opened the sliding door off the dining room. She set the box on the back-patio picnic table, then quickly went back into the house. The smell lingered, not as strongly as before, but enough that Ellie knew she’d be spending some time at the other end of the house.

The baby suddenly seemed a bit more real.

CHAPTER THREE

“IT WAS BAD,” Francisco said as he took the cup of coffee Lydia handed him. “Not as bad as right after he signed the sale papers, but I think he can’t hold his alcohol as well as he used to.”

“If he’s going to do this every time someone from the family comes to the ranch... Well, that isn’t going to work at all,” Lydia said. “He’s going to—” She abruptly closed her mouth as the bathroom door opened, and then slow footsteps came down the hall.

“Son of a bitch,” Walt muttered as he walked into the kitchen, rubbing a hand over his forehead. “Where’s the truck that hit me?”

“The truck had a big Budweiser logo emblazoned on the side,” Lydia said as she folded a dish towel. “And you know better than to stand in the middle of the street in front of it. Sit down.”

Walt sat. He was a small guy, with a thin, wiry frame that had caused a lot of people to misjudge his strength in his younger days. “Who rescued me?”

Francisco raised a hand.

“I owe you.”

“Yeah, you do,” Francisco said. “More than that, you owe Jessie. It was bath night.”

“Sorry about that.” He raised red-rimmed eyes toward Ryan. “You’re quiet.” Ryan shrugged. “Did you win?”

“Of course he won,” Lydia snapped. “The question is, are you going to keep doing this?”

“What?” Walt blinked at her.

“What?” Lydia propped a hand on her aproned hip and waved her spatula at him. “Drinking yourself into oblivion whenever the Bradworths show up.”

“That’s not—”

“Bull. How do you want your eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

“How about you?” she asked Ryan, eyeing him carefully.

She had her mother radar on full force, having sensed something was off the moment he’d walked in the door with Francisco, twenty minutes before. There was no way he was telling her he’d had contact with the Montoyas. As far as he was concerned, that episode was over and done—unless, of course, his father did something stupid.

“I’ve got to get to the vet clinic pretty soon,” Ryan said.

“After you eat.”

“Scrambled,” he said. Another hard mother stare and then Lydia turned back to her eggs. Ryan scowled at Walt. “Francisco will take you home and then you’d better clean up—just in case this lady wants to talk to you.”

“Just like last time,” Walt muttered. When it’d taken Ryan a good day to calm him down after he’d discovered what Mrs. Bradworth had in mind for his ancestral home.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Walt said in a grim voice.

“Yeah?” Ryan bit.

“You’re thinking that it’s stupid of me to stay at the ranch when it hurts knowing someone else owns it.” Walt placed his palms flat on the lace tablecloth. “Well, they might own the business, but I don’t feel like they own the land. They don’t know nothing about the land. That land is still mine.”

Lydia’s eyebrows went up from where she was stirring the eggs at the counter behind Walt.

“I’m part of it,” Walt said. “I’m gonna die there.”

Lydia gave her head a shake and poured the eggs into the pan.

Ryan tamped down the twinge of alarm that had started to rise. Walt had never talked of dying before. “If you’re talking about taking yourself out—”

Walt’s eyes flashed up. “I didn’t say I was going to die soon. Or that I was going to take myself out. Just that I’m never leaving my property.”

“In that case, play ball. Okay?”

“I’ll do my best,” Walt grumbled.

“See to it.”

Fifteen minutes later Francisco escorted a muttering Walt to his pickup for the drive back to the ranch while Ryan hung around a few minutes to help his mother clean the kitchen. He figured, vet or no vet, it was the least he could do.

“I don’t like this dying talk,” Ryan muttered as he closed the dishwasher and set the controls.

“You aren’t his keeper, son.” Lydia brushed wisps of blond hair off her forehead. Despite the rather tumultuous life she’d led, his mother looked younger than her fifty years.

“Closest thing he’s got,” Ryan said, wiping his hands on a towel and then hanging it to dry.

Lydia touched his shoulder. “I heard about Matt Montoya.”

Ryan sucked in a breath, wondering how his mom could mention Matt’s name so casually. “Yeah.”

“How you doing with that?”

Ryan met his mother’s eyes, so like his own. “I don’t quite know yet.”

* * *

IT TOOK A good twenty minutes before Ellie could no longer smell pumpkin, nutmeg and cloves, even with the windows cracked open. The sad thing was that Ellie loved pumpkin pie—or rather, she had.

Finally she ventured into the kitchen and closed the windows, then took a cautious breath. All clear.

Relieved to have the kitchen back, she put the shiny new kettle on the burner to brew some of Angela’s chamomile tea. She ripped open the packet, then quickly sniffed it to make sure the baby didn’t object before dropping the tea bag in the mug.

Reality was definitely setting in. A reality she hadn’t counted on and frankly didn’t think she deserved. She’d planned her life so carefully, after all. Had dotted her i’s, crossed her t’s. Sacrificed. Stayed in and studied when other people went out during college. Worked overtime. Volunteered for assignments.

Sleeping with the handsome guy from Atlanta hadn’t exactly been her usual modus operandi. Even flirting with him had been outside her usual code of conduct, since they were employed by the same company in different branches. But he’d been smooth and funny. Charming. Determined to get her to bed before she made her final consulting trip to Atlanta. And Ellie had enjoyed the journey.

He hadn’t called after their hot night together. The pursuit had ended and Ellie had chalked it up to been-there-done-that. She’d indulged in a one-nighter and had enjoyed it...right up until the new regional manager, who would be overseeing her office from his Atlanta locale, was announced two weeks later. Nick Phillips.

That had been the first sucker punch. The second was when she’d discovered that Nick was now a newlywed. Ellie had been his last hurrah. Fine. He could have been more honest, but she hadn’t been looking for a relationship.

And then she’d missed her period.

That was one too many punches. She could work for a man with whom she’d had a fling. The fact that he was now married made it easier. But she couldn’t do that while carrying his child....

Ellie felt the familiar throb at the base of her skull at the thought. Anxiety and stress—a different kind of stress from the work-related kind that energized her.

She’d thrown up after reading her first pregnancy test, and not because of morning sickness. Another test, taken with hands that shook, gave the same result. And for the first time in her life, Ellie had no idea what to do or how to deal with the numb realization that her life would never be the same.

Denial seemed a viable option. Gallons of ice cream another.

Instead she had called Nick and told him the facts: she was pregnant and he was the father. He’d instantly offered her money, for medical costs, for support, for silence. The silence had been his utmost concern. Or perhaps she would consider a termination....

Ellie had made no promises, told him she’d think about the money, hung up the phone and then drafted her letter of resignation.

Never in her life had she reacted to a situation with her emotions leading the charge, but never in her life had she encountered a situation such as this. Or dreamed she ever would. The reason planners planned was to avoid these kinds of situations.

Ellie took her tea to the dining room table, sat with a notebook and started doing what she should have done from day one: writing down her goals and the necessary steps to achieve them.

Goal— Her pen stilled. She briefly closed her eyes, then wrote Have a healthy baby.

There. No more denial. She was pregnant. In seven and a half months she would be a mother.

Steps to achievement. One: seek prenatal care. Two: research pregnancy.

Ellie's pen hovered for a moment before she wrote:

Goal—Use time at ranch constructively to prepare for personal future.

She had no idea what her steps were there, so she skipped a few lines and moved on to the next item.

Goal—Present Milo with understandable overview of ranch operations to enable him to make future ranch management decisions.

That was what he'd hired the consultant to do, but having another point of reference wouldn't hurt matters.

Steps to achievement. One: observe ranch operations on a daily basis.

She wasn't certain of what she would learn, since she was starting from ground zero, but it seemed like the logical first step.

Two: informally evaluate employee performance, goals, strengths, weaknesses.

Now, that she could do.

Three: observe operations at other ranches and compare to Milo's operation.

Again logical.

Four: meet with consultant.

There. Two goals set out in a businesslike manner. Three if she counted the one with no steps, but she didn't because a nebulous goal was more like a wish.

Feeling slightly more in control, she pushed the notebook aside and sipped her tea. This was a start. A good start. She had direction. She reached for the pen again, hesitated, settled her left hand on her abdomen before she wrote, Research OBs. Make baby appointment.

* * *

FINALLY.

Ellie heard the truck approaching and pulled open the front room curtains to get a look at it, wrinkling her nose as dust wafted into the air. Whoever was cleaning this place needed a few lessons.

The red pickup pulled in between the small house and the barn, just as it had the night before, but this time she got a better look at the driver. Tallish, lean build, neatly dressed in jeans and a short jacket, ball cap over sandy hair.

He shot a quick look in Ellie's direction before he mounted the porch, and she instinctively stepped back even though he probably couldn't see her. As soon as he disappeared inside his house, Ellie slid her feet into her shoes and headed for the door, intent on intercepting him before he took off again.

The sun was out, but the air was crisp as she crossed the wide graveled area between the main house and barn. She hugged her arms around herself, wishing she'd grabbed a coat, but not wanting to turn back. She mounted the single porch step and crossed the creaking planks to the weathered six-paneled door, where she knocked once before rubbing her hands briskly over her upper arms. If this was what summer felt like in Montana, she didn't think she'd want to spend a winter here. She was about to knock again when she heard movement from inside the house, and then a second later the door opened and Ellie found herself face-to-face with a rather incredible pair of greenish-gray eyes in an angular, magazine-worthy face. No wonder Montana was so popular.

"Hi," the guy said with a frown that made Ellie realize she'd been staring. "Do you need help with something?"

"Are you Mr. Feldman?"

The frown cleared. "Madison. Ryan Madison."

Ellie extended her hand. "Ellison Hunter. I'm Angela and Milo's niece."

Ryan took her hand briefly, then released it, but not before she'd registered how very callused his palm was. "Nice to meet you," he said, sounding very much like Lonnie, the pie delivery boy. "I hope you enjoy your stay." And that had been Jessie's line.

"Yes, about that... It's more than just a stay." She sensed Ryan Madison taking a mental step back. After five years of working in human resources, she was pretty good at reading people, reading reactions. Most of the time anyway. She'd totally missed the boat with Nick and was now paying a very steep price. "I'm here to learn about the ranch."

"Learn what?" he asked.

"How it's run."

"Do the Bradworths have a problem with the way the place is run?"

"They don't know yet," Ellie said matter-of-factly. "That's why I'm here. I'm sure everything is fine, but you can see where my aunt and uncle need to be brought up to speed before moving onto the property."

"Of course," Ryan said. His hand was still on the door, as if he wanted to be able to close it as quickly as possible. "What can I do to help?"

"I'd like to meet with all the employees, discuss their duties. Get to know the operation and work from there."

Ryan nodded, but gave no answer.

"I'd like to start soon."

His eyebrows lifted. "How soon?"

"Well, as soon as it's convenient." She wanted something to do, something to focus on.

"Are you thinking today?"

"I was."

"Fine."

But she had a feeling it wasn't. "I need to get in touch with the other employees and don't have the means to do so. I can't find any records."

"There are three of us. Francisco Garcia, Walt and myself."

"Could you give me cell numbers?" she asked.

"I can for Francisco," he said. "Walt doesn't have a cell phone."

"Really?"

"Old school."

She didn't like the sound of that. Old school was not usually the best practice when it came to business, but then Angela had said the place was about fifty years behind the times.

"I'll have him get hold of you," Ryan said.

"That's what Mrs. Garcia said yesterday."

"Jessie's kind of busy with the kids right now. Maybe it slipped her mind. I'll have Walt down here by the end of the day."

"Thank you." She shifted her weight, wishing she wasn't feeling the urge to let her eyes travel slowly down his long body. "When would be a good time to meet with you?"

He looked over her head, out at the pastures, seemed to debate then said, "Whenever you want."

"Half an hour? At the house?"

Ryan shrugged. "Sure. Half an hour."

"See you then."

* * *

RYAN SLOWLY CLOSED the door. This woman was here to evaluate the ranch? Great timing.

He watched through the half-open curtains as she walked across the graveled drive toward the main house. Ellison Hunter wore jeans that hugged her legs, a long expensive-looking sweater and

flat ballerina shoes. Her dark blond hair was twisted up into one of those French-roll things that made him want to pull out the pins and let it fall back down. Cool and elegant, she didn't look like any kind of ranch expert he'd ever seen, but looks could be deceiving. One of the best ropers he'd ever encountered was a sixty-five-year-old grandmother. And she wasn't half bad at flanking and throwing, either.

Ellison disappeared into the main house and Ryan stepped away from the window and headed back into the bedroom to find a decent shirt.

Damn. What was this about? It figured that the new owners were going to do something with the ranch, since it was, despite what Walt seemed to think, theirs. Walt had been hoping that the Bradworths would be like the new owners of the old Trail Creek Ranch and never set foot on the place, instead using it as some kind of a tax dodge, and, frankly, so had he. Not to be.

Twenty-five minutes later Ryan knocked on the main-house door. Ellison answered almost immediately and he noticed that she'd put on makeup. Nothing major—just brownish eyeliner that made her green eyes seem larger, and lip gloss. Her hair had been smoothed and she had changed out of the long sweater for a white blouse and black jacket that, despite the jeans, made her seem much more...official.

He didn't have a good feeling about official.

Or maybe it was just that he hated being in the dark. Until matters were settled with the family and Walt came to terms with whatever their plans were, things could be a bit dicey.

"Have a seat," Ellison said, waving him to one of a set of leather chairs near the tall windows looking out into the semitamed backyard. Walt had never been much for landscaping, but on Mrs. Bradworth's first visit she had made it clear that the lawn was to be mowed regularly and the bushes trimmed back. Flowers would be nice. Unfortunately, the deer and rabbits had thought flowers were nice, too, resulting in a lot of stems and not many flowers.

After Ryan sat, Ellison took the opposite chair with her back to the windows and settled a yellow legal pad on her knee. Then she smiled at him. A cool, professional, put-you-at-ease smile that only served to tense him up. He'd seen a similar smile once before—just before getting laid off from his last job during college.

"Just a bit about me," she said. "I work in the field of human resources, so I tend to focus on employees as...well, resources."

Cool. He was a resource. With her fake, distant smile, she looked like the type who saw employees as resources rather than people.

"Employees are the most valuable component of a smooth-running operation, as I'm sure you know."

The nasty feeling in the pit of Ryan's stomach intensified. "This place runs smoothly."

She smiled again, kind of, and clicked open her pen. "I'd like to talk to everyone employed here, find out what it is you do and how it contributes to the overall operation of the ranch."

"Is this a formal evaluation?"

"Not really. It's more of a get-to-know-the-operation evaluation." She cocked her head. "That's not a problem, is it?"

There was no way to answer that question honestly.

"It's just a surprise, you showing up to get to know the operation," Ryan said smoothly.

"My aunt told Mr. Feldman I was coming a week ago, so my visit is not really a surprise," she replied in a reasonable voice.

As he'd thought. And Walt hadn't said a thing until the very last minute when he'd phoned Jessie to send the keys and then gone off on his bender. Or perhaps he'd called midbender.

"The informal evaluation part," he said. "Did your aunt mention it to Walt?" Because he didn't believe Walt would have kept that secret. An evaluation was something they needed to prepare for—or at the very least, prepare Walt for.

“Actually, I’m not certain,” Ellison replied.

None of this felt good, but good or bad, he had to deal with it. Ryan leaned back in his chair.

“What do you want to know?”

Ellison squared up her notepad. “What is your job title?”

“Cowboy.”

“No. Really.”

He spread his palms in an I-don’t-know-what-else-to-say gesture and she frowned as she realized he was serious. She wrote cowboy after his name.

“I guess you could call me a ranch hand, if it makes you feel better.”

“No, I’m fine with cowboy. And your duties are?”

Ryan leaned his head back slightly as he debated where to begin. “What season?”

Ellison’s eyebrows arched before she said with a faint note of challenge in her voice, “Spring.”

“Calving, branding, fencing. First cutting of alfalfa. Evaluate the grazing.”

Ellison made a note. “Summer?”

“Haying, fencing. Vaccinating. Moving cattle. Irrigating.” A movement outside the window caught his eye. A blue jay had landed on the flat box sitting on the picnic table. The bird turned his head to study the closed flaps through first one eye and then the other.

“Fall?” Ellison asked, and he turned his attention back to her.

“Getting the fields in shape for winter. Fall branding. Preg checking.”

“Preg checking?” Strangely, her cheeks seemed to go a bit pink.

“Seeing which cows are pregnant, then deciding whether to keep or ship those who aren’t.”

“Ship?”

“Sell.”

“Winter?”

His mouth curved into a sardonic smile. “In the winter we mend the harness, of course.”

She gave him a cautious sideways glance. “Meaning?”

Did this woman have no sense of humor? “You can’t do much in the winter here except for feed the livestock. In the old days, the ranchers and farmers would use the downtime to care for their equipment, which is what we do. Winter servicing. And feeding. And generally just trying to keep everything alive.”

Outside the window the jay starting pecking at the box. Ryan kind of wished he was outside with the bird.

Ellie pointed a finger at the legal pad. “These jobs you’ve mentioned, could you be more specific about what it is you do?”

“Like make a list or something?”

“If you made a résumé, what skills would you put on it?”

He simply blinked at her. “Am I writing a résumé? Or a job description that you might post somewhere in the future when you hire someone to replace me?” He didn’t want to give her ideas, but he didn’t want to make it easy to replace him, either.

Ms. Hunter blinked at him. “Neither. I want you to write the list so that the owners can be familiar with exactly what it is you do.”

“Do you want bullet points?”

“Yes.” There was no hint of humor in her voice.

Another jay landed on the picnic table, then two more. A squabble broke out, but the original jay held his position on top of the box.

“I’ll do what I can,” Ryan said. “I’ve been gone a couple days and I have a full schedule today. Maybe I can get something worked up tonight or tomorrow.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

Yeah. I bet you will. And I bet you'll be wearing that fake smile if you happen to announce you're letting us all go. If the worst happened, he could get another job, but Walt needed this position and Ryan hated to think about what would happen if he had to move off the place—especially after his wild talk that morning.

“What else—”

Ellison sucked in a sudden breath, cutting him off, and jumped to her feet. It was obvious what had startled her. Birds. Lots of them.

The jays had managed to work open a flap of the box and now five of them were happily pecking at what looked like a pumpkin pie. Ryan rose to his feet and walked over to the window.

It was a pumpkin pie, and he instantly recognized what was left of the pastry leaf design on top.

“You put Jessie's pie out for the birds?” he asked as he turned toward Ellison, whose cheeks were flushed a deep pink.

“No.” The word came out too fast.

“Then why is it out there?”

“I wanted it to cool so I could put it in the fridge.”

“Last I heard fridges did a real good job of cooling.”

Ellison pushed a few stray strands of hair back into place. “The boy who brought it—Lonnie—said I shouldn't put it in the fridge, so I put it outside.”

“As opposed to leaving it on the counter in here?” Ellison went totally red. Good. Ryan cocked his head. “How much time have you spent in the country?”

“Some.” She met his eyes with a touch of defiance.

Skiing, perhaps? “Don't put food outside. It brings in the animals. You're lucky that mob of birds isn't a bear.”

Her lips started to form the word bear then tightened. “I didn't know,” she said stiffly, giving Ryan the distinct impression that she did not like to be wrong.

“I really have to get to work,” he said. Not that this hasn't been fun and all. But he needed to get out of there and regroup before he said anything that jeopardized his job, or Walt's. As it was, he was too damned close to pointing out that she wasn't qualified to evaluate a ranch or anything in a rural setting.

“I understand.” Ellie walked to the window, close to where he stood—close enough that he caught the subtle scent of probably expensive perfume—to get a better look at the bird-infested pie. The biggest jay was now standing smack in the middle of it, orange pumpkin staining his underbelly. Ellison pursed her lips thoughtfully before looking up at him, her expression once again distant. Professional.

“Could we keep this between us?” she asked.

Afraid of owning up to your mistakes? The words teetered on Ryan's tongue, but instead he said, “The pie?”

“Yes.”

“I'd hate to hurt Jessie's feelings, so yeah. I'll keep quiet.”

For now. He'd make his final decision after he got a feel for how all of this was going to play out.

CHAPTER FOUR

THIS COULD GET UGLY. Ryan made a supreme effort to relax his tight jaw muscles as he headed out of the house and across the lawn. He failed.

I view employees as resources.

Ryan agreed that employees were resources, but the way she'd said it had made it sound as if employees were interchangeable cogs. Things rather than people.

Maybe he was misjudging her intent, but he was certain that Ellison Hunter didn't know jack about ranch employees and she was in no position to judge them. She didn't understand the blood, sweat and tears that went into making a ranch run and prosper. The sacrifices made. The simple joys

that compensated for giving up so much. She wouldn't understand that the characteristics that might appear undesirable on an employee evaluation—stubbornness, overt independence, speaking one's mind without regard to tact—were characteristics that helped a person to succeed in this business.

And how was she going to take his rodeo absences? Somehow he didn't think Ms. Hunter was going to be all that amenable to him disappearing for several days every week during the months of July and August. Tough. She wasn't there to take over management—at least not yet—so until he was told differently, he was going to continue as he had been doing, hiring Lonnie to cover for him and juggling his schedule. Francisco could watch Walt.

Instead of going into his house, Ryan shifted course and went to his truck. Lonnie had fed the livestock that wasn't on pasture that morning, and the rest of the day's work could wait.

Less than five minutes later Jessie had him seated at the kitchen table with a piece of warm coffee cake, while Jeff ran his cars back and forth over the opposite end of the long handmade table. Jessie was nervous. It showed in her jerky movements, the set of her lips.

“So Francisco has to make a résumé?” she asked. Ranch jobs were not easy to come by and even a hint that they would have to start looking was enough to chase the color from her face. Francisco would probably have no trouble getting a job as a mechanic, but getting another place to live with room for their livestock on a single salary would be rough.

“No. She wants a list of what I do and I'm sure she'll want the same from Francisco. And Walt.”

Jessie gave her head a shake, her expression grim. “I don't like this.”

“Neither do I,” he muttered.

“More coffee?” She automatically reached for the pot, but Ryan stood before she got hold of it.

“No. I'm heading over to Walt's and I'll probably have more there.” The way the day was going, he'd be lucky if he got to work by noon.

“I'll have Francisco stop by your place after he gets home.”

“Sounds good.”

Jessie bit the edge of her lip. “It was just so much better when Walt owned the place outright.”

“The bank owned it, Jessie. And they were ready to take it.”

“Maybe that would have been better,” she muttered, bending to tie Bella's shoe. “Then the trauma would be over and we'd have other jobs.”

“Maybe.”

“By-eee,” Bella called to Ryan, waving her chubby fist at him.

“Bye,” he said with a half smile, taking the hint. He was supposed to leave.

* * *

WALT'S PLACE WAS dark. Ryan hesitated before he knocked. If the old man was sleeping off his rough night, he hated to disturb him, but if Ellison was going to talk to him today, he had to do some prep work. Walt had met with the owners before, but in those cases he'd gone on his bender after the talk, not before.

“Coming,” Walt grumbled from the other side of the door at Ryan's second knock. The door swung open and the old man blinked at the sun behind Ryan's back. “Yeah?”

“Can I come in?” Ryan asked.

“I guess.” Walt stood back, allowing Ryan to walk past him before he shut the door, blocking the sun.

“Got something against light?” Ryan asked.

“Only when it burns a hole in my head.”

Ryan looked his mentor over. He'd changed his clothes, so the bar smell wasn't clinging to him. Good.

“The lady wants to meet with you today.”

“What are you? The go-between?” Walt asked, looking insulted.

“I'm the one who lives close. She came to see me and told me she wants to meet with all of us.”

“I’ve met with these guys before. No big deal.”

“Yeah, but this is a different kind of meeting.”

“How so?”

“This lady is here to evaluate the ranch. She wants to know about our jobs. What we do and when.” Ryan rubbed the side of his neck. “She’s some kind of human-resources person.”

“Human resources?” Walt scowled and Ryan could see that this was the first he’d heard of the evaluation, so the only thing he’d kept to himself was the fact that one of the family was coming for a visit.

“Okay, so I tell her what I do. Anything else?” He gave Ryan a narrow-eyed look. “Shouldn’t you be on the mountain looking for those four head by now?”

Ryan let out a breath. “I’m getting a late start. I had to go to town, you know. Pick someone up.”

“No. You didn’t. I would have made it back on my own this morning.”

Walt never apologized for his benders. To him they were part of his stress-management program. He never drove drunk. More than once Francisco or Ryan had had to return to a bar to pick up the keys Walt had handed over to the bartender the night before.

Walt nodded. “I’ll contact the lady and set up a meeting time. I can do it alone.”

“I’m not trying to be your keeper or anything, Walt. I just wanted to warn you. This evaluation thing kind of blindsided me and I didn’t want the same thing to happen to you.”

“Thanks.”

“And...” Ryan shoved his hands into his pockets. “You might want to write down a list of what you do around here.”

“Justify my existence.”

“Be prepared for the interview.”

“All right. I will. Now go to work before I fire you.”

Ryan walked to the door. Hopefully, Walt would have worked his way past his headache by the time he talked to the woman. Ryan would have given anything to be in on the meeting, run interference, but Walt was on his own. He was the manager, not Ryan. He just hoped Walt didn’t do anything stupid, such as tell her he planned to die on the property.

* * *

EXACTLY THREE WEEKS had passed since quitting her job and Ellie had yet to acclimate to her new schedule. Having time on her hands made her feel antsy, almost guilty. Yes, she had a purpose here at the ranch, but it wasn’t going to fill eight hours a day. The internet/satellite guy was supposed to show up tomorrow to work on the connection and hook up the television, and the fact that she was counting the hours until then bothered her. What kind of person was she that she had to have the internet and television?

The kind who’d been career driven and no longer had a career to fill her time. When was the last time she hadn’t had a schedule so full that it was a challenge to simply make it through the day?

The day before she’d resigned.

Ryan had driven away shortly after she’d spoken to him—off to warn his boss, who had no cell phone, no doubt. Well, good. She wanted the staff to be prepared. It would save time...although right now saving time wasn’t a concern. She needed something to fill time.

If she went now, she could familiarize herself with the layout of the ranch without wondering where Ryan was and if he was watching her. There was something about him that she found unsettling.

Unmitigated hotness, perhaps?

She hadn’t expected him to be so attractive. Hadn’t expected to have to fight herself to keep from watching him walk across the living room to the door earlier that morning and wondering just what exactly he looked like without the worn denim jeans and white cotton shirt.

What the hell was she doing thinking thoughts like that? Nick had been hot, too. Hot, charming, dishonest. The dishonesty had been by omission, but dishonesty all the same. Ellie pressed her hand

to her abdomen. She would not judge all men by Nick, but she wasn't going to allow herself to be taken in by general hotness anytime soon, either...although judging by the way Ryan Madison had responded to her during their first meetings, being tempted by hotness wasn't going to be an issue. She was the enemy, and he'd made little effort to hide his displeasure about her being there.

She slipped on her shoes and headed for the door just as the red truck drove past the house toward the barn. So much for him not being around. Ellie paused at the door. She couldn't spend her days cooped up in the house. The people who worked here were employees. She wasn't exactly the boss, but she was a representative of the boss. No different than anyplace else where she'd consulted.

Except that these people lived here.

Well, so did she and she was going to get to know her surroundings—although she'd really prefer to explore when no one was around. She was surrounded by the unfamiliar, and Ellie didn't like it when she wasn't in total control.

* * *

RYAN SADDLED SKIPPER and headed out to find the few head of cattle that had been reported on the mountain, wondering if he could possibly get back before Walt had his meeting with Ellison. Not that he could control any part of the meeting, but he wanted to know the outcome as soon as possible. It wasn't that he didn't trust Walt... No, it was that he didn't trust Walt.

He had just started across the pasture when he heard a sharp shriek. Skipper's head jerked up at the sound and Ryan reined the gelding around, various scenarios chasing through his brain. He pulled Skipper up at the gate, dismounted and then stood for a moment, wondering where the scream had come from.

The jays squawked from the trees near the house, probably wondering when the next pie was going to appear, but other than that the place was silent. Ryan looped the lead rope attached to Skipper's halter over the gatepost and then headed for the house, wondering what in hell the deal was.

He knocked on the door. A few seconds later it opened and Ellison gave him a politely inquiring look that made him wonder if he had or had not heard a scream. No—he'd heard it. It'd been a woman's voice and since Jessie was a half mile away, Ellison had to be the screamer.

"Are you okay?" he asked. She looked okay. Not a blond hair out of place.

"Yes," she said simply.

Ryan waited a couple seconds and then, when it became clear that she was not going to expand on her answer, he said, "I thought I heard someone yell."

Color rose in Ellison's face but her expression remained controlled as she said, "I hadn't realized I was that loud."

"You were."

"Yes, well." She cleared her throat. "There was a snake on the steps. It startled me."

"That was probably—"

"Hiss. I know. The boy who brought the pie warned me, but I forgot."

Ryan regarded her for a moment, wondering how someone could belt out a shriek like that then appear so indifferent. Long practice? Ice water in the veins? He felt the urge to shake her up but, for the good of everyone involved, refrained. "Well, as long as everything is okay. Sorry to have disturbed you." He touched his hat, a gesture he'd picked up from Walt many years ago.

"It's not okay," she blurted as he turned to go. He turned back, surprised at the note of what had sounded a lot like desperation in her voice. She cleared her throat again, then said more calmly, "Something needs to be done about the snake."

"He's harmless," Ryan said. He didn't want her taking a shovel to poor old Hiss, who showed up every May and stayed until late July when he went off to who knew where.

"I don't think my aunt and uncle will welcome a snake this close to the house."

"I'll see if I can get Lonnie to catch him and move him...although he may come back. Snakes do that." And Hiss had. Every year.

“Then move him far away.”

“Will do,” Ryan said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go to work.” He had a lot to get done before he left for the Wolf Point rodeo and he had to carve out some time to practice tonight.

“Of course,” Ellison said. “Sorry to have delayed you.”

“Not a problem.”

* * *

ELLIE CLOSED THE door slowly and leaned back against it, then turned and watched through the leaded-glass panes as the cowboy returned to his horse. Her heart was still hammering from the snake encounter and it seemed to be hammering even harder after talking to Ryan Madison.

The snake had to have been six feet long, coiled up on the bottom stone step enjoying the sun. Ellie wasn’t particularly squeamish about snakes, as long as they kept their distance, but she’d practically stepped on this one and if it hadn’t seen her coming and slithered into action, she would have. But instead she’d seen the movement, recognized what it was and screamed.

Was there any way she could blame hormones? Ellie wasn’t a screamer. She continued to watch as Ryan walked through the gate to the plain brown horse that waited on the other side, pulled the rope off the gatepost, coiled it and tied it to his saddle. Then he mounted, the movement quick and smooth and somehow very sexy, gathered his reins and urged the horse out across the field.

Yes. He was definitely a cowboy, as he’d stated during their interview.

One that came to the rescue of screaming women.

Ellie pressed her hands against her warm cheeks. Hormones or not, that wasn’t going to happen again. The phone rang and Ellie followed the sound to the old-fashioned landline in the living room, answering it on the fifth ring.

“This is Walter Feldman,” the man said stiffly. “I understand that you want to set up a meeting with me.”

“I do.” And she was going to keep an open mind about this guy that Milo said was hell to work with.

“When?”

“Anytime that’s convenient to you.”

“This afternoon work?”

Ellie glanced at the clock. It was close to eleven. “Yes. That would be fine. Say three o’clock?”

“I’ll be there. Goodbye.” The line went dead.

Ellie wrinkled her forehead as she put the receiver back in the cradle. Open mind. He’d said his piece, made his appointment and hung up. That at least smacked of efficiency. Ellie reached for her sweater. That gave her an hour or two to take her self-guided tour, maybe come up with some questions to ask about the ranch itself.

She paused at the top of the porch steps as she pulled the sweater up over her arms and checked for the snake. Nothing, thank goodness, but she still hurried down the steps. Realistically the snake had probably been as frightened as she’d been—but it probably wasn’t as embarrassed.

It was no big deal, she told herself as she crossed the flagstones. She’d had a couple missteps with the local wildlife, but now she had more of an idea of what to do—watch out for snakes and keep the food in the house. And she might try thinking about the cowboy strictly as an employee, not as a rather fascinating man. It’d probably be better for her blood pressure.

* * *

WALTER FELDMAN WAS barely three inches taller than Ellie. His lined face was freshly shaved and he was dressed in a carefully pressed and starched white Western shirt and dark blue jeans. His boots were polished and he wore a string tie around his neck with a silver slide. Classic cowboy...who smelled vaguely of alcohol. It wasn’t on his breath, but it was there.

“Have a seat,” she said with a smile. He hesitated, then sat, his gaze traveling around the room that had once belonged to him. Maybe she should have arranged to meet at his place.

“I have my papers here,” he said, shifting his attention back to her.

“Your papers?” Ellie asked with a lift of her eyebrows.

“Yeah. Ryan said that you’d want a rundown of what I do.”

“Oh, yes. Of course. Thank you.” She reached out for the papers, watching to see if his hands shook at all. Nope. Steady as a rock. He’d written out his job description on plain white computer paper in careful block letters—all caps. No sign of unsteadiness in his handwriting, either, and since he had to have written this today, after being warned by Ryan, she decided not to jump to any conclusions about him being an alcoholic.

But he had been drinking heavily recently. His red-rimmed eyes, shining vividly blue in his lined face, gave testament to that. That and her hypersensitive sense of smell, thank you very much, progesterone.

“I, uh, put down everything I could think of, but might have left some stuff out because I didn’t know what you wanted.”

Ellie smiled, remembering her vow to keep an open mind. “Of course you didn’t. I’d planned to let you know what I wanted when we met, but apparently Mr. Madison beat me to it.”

“Ryan’s efficient.”

Ellie ignored the plug for Ryan and took a minute to read what the old man had written. He gave detailed information about cattle breeding and lineages he favored. He outlined the cattle-production schedule and had a section where he listed prizes and awards he’d won with his bulls.

“So your expertise is cattle breeding.”

“It’s what I do.”

“And around the ranch, what are your management responsibilities?”

“Well, Ryan takes care of the pastures and grazing. Francisco does the mechanic-ing, keeps all the equipment running, maintains the buildings and roads and such. We’re all on duty during calving.”

“And you run the breeding program?”

“I do.”

“Do you and Ryan and Francisco meet?” The old man wrinkled his forehead and Ellie said, “How do they know what to do and when?”

“Common sense is a big help.”

“So you don’t outline jobs for them?”

“If I see something that needs done, I mention it, but these guys are pretty much self-starters.”

“Describe an average day for me.” Another frown and Ellie explained, “I worked for a large software company until recently. I’m not familiar with ranching.”

“Then why are you here?” he asked pointedly.

“To get familiar.”

Walt took a deep breath, as if calming himself, then said, “On an average day I help feed the cattle. I might check fences. I might dig postholes. I might run the tractor or muck out the corrals. I might deal with irrigation.” He gave a frustrated movement of his hands. “It all depends on the day and the season.”

“I see.” She decided to shift gears. “As the supervisor, are you satisfied with Mr. Madison’s and Mr. Garcia’s job performances?”

“They’re still here, aren’t they?”

She looked down at the paper Walt had given her, then back up at the old man. “My job is to collect information about how this ranch is run and organize it so that my aunt and uncle can see what present practices are in place and move forward. When the consultant arrives—”

“What consultant?” Walt snapped, his eyebrows coming together fiercely. “I’ve heard nothing about a consultant.”

Probably because you aren’t very good at communicating with your boss and are therefore skating on thin ice.

“Later this summer a ranch consultant will be evaluating practices at the Rocky View. I’ll act as liaison between him and my aunt and uncle.”

“Who is it?”

“The consultant? I don’t know his name.” Although that was on her list of things to talk to Milo about once she’d settled in and could get hold of him.

Walt shifted in his chair, his expression tight, threatened.

“When’s he coming?”

“Later this summer and, before he comes, I want to be well familiar with the ranch. To do that, I need some idea of the hierarchy,” she explained patiently. “How decisions are made. When they’re made and by whom.”

Walt let out an exasperated breath. For a second she thought he wasn’t going to answer, then he said, “Ryan makes the decisions on the pastures and grazing. Francisco handles the maintenance and I handle the breeding program.”

“That sounds like three separate entities rather than a team being managed by one person.”

“Look, Miss...” He frowned as he fought to remember her name and then gave up. “This system works. Now, I’ll admit to hitting some hard times, but after Ryan came on...things changed and we’re making money again.”

Some, according to Milo, but not a lot. “A business needs one manager,” Ellie persisted. “Not three people working independently.”

“It has one. Me.”

Ellie sighed. He wasn’t getting it and it looked, judging by the expression he wore, that he was thinking the exact same thought. They both jumped when a knock rattled the back door.

“That’d be Francisco,” Walt muttered. “He has some business in town tonight and wanted to get this over with before he goes.”

“Maybe we can talk some more later,” Ellie said as Walt got to his feet. Obviously in his mind the interview was over.

“Yeah. I’ll just tell Francisco to come on in.” He was moving toward the door so fast that Ellie was surprised that she didn’t get the Doppler effect.

Milo was correct—this guy needed work on his communication skills. And Ellie needed to keep an eye on him to see if his drinking was a problem.

* * *

“SHE’S BRINGING IN a ranch consultant,” Walt repeated as he paced along the cedar rail fence behind the bunkhouse. He stopped to glare at Ryan. “You know what happened to the Vineyard Ranch when they brought in George Monroe to consult. That asshole.”

“Nothing saying it’s going to be George.” But Ryan had a bad feeling it was. The Bradworths and the Kenyons, who’d bought the Vineyard a few years ago, were friends. The Kenyons were probably the reason the Bradworths had bought the Rocky View.

“It’s George,” Walt growled.

Ryan coiled his rope. There’d be no focusing until Walt got a grip. After the snake scare with Ellison, he’d spent a couple hours on the mountain looking for the cows, then he had come back to work on the broken irrigation head gate. He’d hoped to be finished in time to rope some calves, but had gotten back too late, so he’d had to settle for roping the dummy. Until Walt had shown up, livid.

Walt’s scowl intensified. “Aren’t you going to practice?”

“I’m good,” Ryan said.

“I’ve never known you to be good.”

“Good enough, then.” Ryan rarely sloughed practice, but tonight he figured he needed to focus on Walt. Calm him down before he left tomorrow night. He had back-to-back rodeos three hundred miles apart, one of which had a rich purse he needed to win—a purse that his brother wouldn’t be fighting him for. It still felt so damned strange.

“Having this woman around is very unsettling,” Walt grumbled, resuming his pacing. “These people know nothing.” He shot another fierce look at Ryan. “She told me she knows nothing. She’s ‘here to learn,’” he quipped, miming quotation marks.

“I know you hoped this would be like the Bar R and the Trail Creek,” Ryan said, referring to two ranches that had sold to absentee owners solely interested in tax write-offs. “And it may still play out that way. Give it some time. Don’t piss these guys off.”

“If George has his way, then none of us will be here to piss anyone off,” Walt muttered.

“You don’t know that it’s George.”

“You don’t know that it isn’t,” Walt growled.

Ryan came to stand in front of the old man, waiting for him to glare up at him before he said, “I’m not telling you what to do or anything—” although he really was “—but while I’m gone, kind of steer clear of Ms. Hunter, at least until you cool off. No sense burning any bridges just because she might be bringing in George Monroe.”

“Afraid I’ll muck things up for all of us?” Walt asked.

“Totally.” The frustration of working with a person who knew nothing about ranching but was suddenly the boss was that there was a lot of explaining to do. Some people could take it, some couldn’t. Walt was in the latter camp. He wasn’t going to put up with micromanaging and questioning the wisdom of his decisions.

Walt considered, then gave a soft snort. “Maybe lying low is the best thing to do.”

“For now,” Ryan agreed, relieved. “No chance you want to come to the rodeo with me? Lonnie and Francisco could cover while we’re gone.”

“I have a lot to do rebuilding the calving barn,” Walt said. “And hopefully I’ll be here next spring to use it.”

“Which is why you’re going to lie low for now.”

“Agreed,” the old man muttered. “I’ll be invisible. Or as invisible as I can be with power tools.”

Walt got into his rig a few minutes later and took off for his house, or the Garcia’s, depending on whether he went there to eat or not. Sometimes Walt liked being social and playing Grandpa to the kids, and sometimes he just needed to be left alone. Ryan and Francisco and Jessie understood that. Ellison probably wouldn’t.

Once Walt was gone, Ryan threw a few more practice loops before deciding to call it a night. He’d asked Lonnie to handle the irrigating tomorrow while he took one last stab at finding Walt’s missing cattle, and then it was simply a matter of showering and driving two hundred miles to the rodeo where he’d compete the following morning. It’d be a string of long days, but that was the way it was in the summers. Nothing he could do about it except deal with sleep deprivation.

“Excuse me?” Ellison’s voice startled him. After Walt left for the day, Ryan was always alone. Not anymore.

She stood at the corner of the bunkhouse wearing a long white shirt over slim dark jeans with those flimsy flat shoes, regarding him with those cool green eyes that he found more attractive than he wanted to admit. She started toward him when he didn’t answer immediately and as she got closer he could see that her hair wasn’t as perfect as usual. Instead it looked as if she’d been resting her head in her hands, loosening the strands around her face, giving her a softer look. “I was wondering if you were able to do anything about the snake?” she asked.

“I, uh, no,” he confessed. He’d pushed the matter of Hiss to the back of his mind and left it there. “I haven’t had time and I didn’t see Lonnie today.”

“Could you maybe call him?” Ellison asked with a polite edge to her voice.

So much for softness. “Sure.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight, but there’s no guarantee that Lonnie’s going to be able to catch him immediately.”

“He can try.”

“That he can.” Ryan walked toward her, rope in hand. She cocked her head.

“Were you roping?”

“Yes.” It seemed best to keep answers short and sweet, and then maybe she’d go back to her house.

“Like for exercise?”

A smile formed before he could stop it. “I guess.”

She studied him for a moment, obviously trying to get a read. “Do you do a lot of roping on the ranch?”

“During branding, yeah.” He stopped a few feet away from her, letting the rigid coils of the rope bounce on the side of his leg. “But that’s not why I’m practicing. I rodeo during the summers.”

“I’ve never met anyone who rodeos.” She smiled that cool smile of hers. “I’ve never met anyone who uses the word rodeo as a verb.”

“I guess that’s because you’re from the other side of the Mississippi.” He bounced the rope off his leg again, the coils making a soft clacking sound, impatient to get back to his place, away from her. He debated about announcing that he’d be gone for the next couple days, but decided not to take a chance on her messing things up. She wasn’t there to take over ranch operations. She was there to get a feel for how it was run. His absences were part of the package. “I didn’t get a chance to write my bullet points yet.”

“Let me know when you do.” Spoken like a boss.

“I will. And I’ll have Lonnie keep an eye out for Hiss. Now, if there’s nothing else, I haven’t eaten yet and I’d kind of like to.”

“Of course,” she said briskly as she took a step back. But there was something in her expression that he hadn’t expected to see there. A touch of disappointment. A touch of...loneliness?

Welcome to rural life, lady.

CHAPTER FIVE

ELLIE WAS ALMOST at the house when a loud bellow made her jump. One of the cows out in the pasture was making a noise that she’d had no idea cows made until she’d arrived here. She went into the house, closing the door behind her, shutting out the cows, the night. Her closest neighbor who hadn’t been able to get away from her quick enough.

It was understandable. These guys were concerned about their jobs with a new owner taking over. Since she spent her time advising people on hiring and firing issues, she was used to employees giving her a wide berth when possible, measuring words as they spoke to her, but she wasn’t used to it happening in a situation where the employees were the only other human beings around for miles.

Damn it, she’d lived alone for years and being by herself shouldn’t feel so overwhelming.

Except that now she was alone with a lot of time to think.

Ellie went to the kitchen and put on a pot of tea. She’d probably regret it later that night as she made her way to the john, but right now she needed something to help her relax and chamomile was her only option. While waiting for the water to boil, she opened her notebook, reviewed her goals. Tomorrow she would make progress on all of them. She’d research obstetricians, call Milo for more information on the ranch consultant and contact a few business associates. It wouldn’t fill the day, but she’d be moving forward. She was going to be a mother—to a child who was offended by the smell of pumpkin—and she needed to get her act together.

A mother. Wow.

The thought still hit her hard. Ellie pressed her fingers against her abdomen, closed her eyes, tried to visualize. There was a baby in there. A little, tiny, totally vulnerable child. How long until she felt it move? Would she still be here at the ranch? Ellie dropped her hands, stared down at the notebook again. Funny how getting nauseous over the pie had made the baby seem real, made her realize that she no longer half hoped that nature would take care of matters. She wasn’t ready for any of this, wished with all of her heart it hadn’t happened, but it had and she was going to deal with it.

All of it. Babies, jobs, ranches. She might not be able to follow her old path, have her old life back, but she could make a new life, a new path. She just wished that as she did it, she felt more like her old self. Confident. In control.

The kettle started to whistle and Ellie closed her notebook. Instead of being confident and in control, she was afraid—afraid that she was never ever going to feel like her old self again. Afraid of being responsible for a child. Afraid of messing up.

And that was why she hated being alone right now. Too much time to think about just how afraid she was.

* * *

EARLY WEDNESDAY MORNING Ellie managed to get hold of Milo at the hospital before he started work and to ask for more information about the ranch consultant.

“I didn’t get you that? I thought I forwarded the correspondence.”

“Maybe it got lost in cyberspace,” Ellie said.

“Or maybe I got busy and forgot,” Milo said. “Sometimes I don’t know what day it is.

“How’s it going there?”

“I’m settling in. I’ve met the employees and taken a look at the property. Now I’m going to observe day-to-day operations.” Although she’d yet to determine exactly how she was going to do that when the employees didn’t want her around.

“Excellent,” Milo said. “How’s everything else?” Meaning, of course, her pregnancy.

“I’m researching obstetricians. I should have an appointment by this afternoon at the latest.” It felt strange discussing OB appointments with her uncle, but Milo and Angela were the closest thing to grandparents as her child would probably have. Mavis would make the occasional appearance, but Ellie had no misconceptions about her taking a role in the child’s life.

Although she had heard of people doing better with their grandchildren than with their own children. Maybe...?

Ellie refused to get her hopes up.

After talking to Milo, Ellie spent the morning reading reviews of obstetricians in surrounding cities and towns, noting the pros and cons of each: distance, insurances accepted, patient relations. It’d taken most of the morning for her to compile a list of acceptable doctors, only to call the top three and discover that they were booked full. They wouldn’t be accepting patients for the next several months, although she could join the waiting list.

She didn’t have several months, and the idea of joining a waiting list seemed ludicrous under the circumstances. Ellie felt the beginning of panic as she hung up for the third time. Apparently patients of her top candidates saw the doctors long before they actually got pregnant—as in they’d planned to get pregnant. Well, that’d been the way Ellie had thought it would happen to her, too. She’d meet a guy, date until she was certain she wanted to spend her life with him, they’d marry, wait two years and then get pregnant. They would, of course, have one boy and one girl. That had been the plan.

It was so thoroughly depressing that it wasn’t working out that way for her. That she was going to have to scramble to find an obstetrician that met her standards.

Doctor number four was located in a smaller town close to the ranch, and when she called she was relieved to hear that they were taking new patients, but the soonest they could book a consultation would be in three weeks. Ellie took the appointment. She would have felt better, and more invisible, with a doctor in Bozeman or Butte, but people were going to find out she was pregnant sooner or later. She might even end up having the child here.

In a place where she’d alienated everyone in a ten-mile radius.

Maybe she needed to do something about that.

* * *

IF THERE WERE cows on that mountain, then they were doing a pretty damned good job of evading him. Ryan had spent almost ten hours in the saddle trying to find the strays, and he was

beginning to wonder if someone had taken the animals. Whatever, he was late getting home and he still had to load PJ and drive two hundred miles tonight.

Ryan had just dismounted when he heard the door of the ranch house open and close. Great. The boss.

He continued to unsaddle the gelding as footsteps came across the flagstones, then crunched on gravel. Ellison stopped several yards away from him and for a moment said nothing.

"I don't know if Lonnie took care of the snake," he said, answering the question he was pretty sure she was going to ask.

"He looked for it, but couldn't find it," Ellison said. "You were gone a long time today." She shifted slightly as he shot her a quick glance, wondering if the comment was a conversation starter, a criticism, or what. "I saw you ride away early this morning," she continued. "What do you do on a horse all day?"

Conversation starter. Maybe the boss was getting lonely. "Today I looked for missing cattle."

"How do cattle go missing?"

"Any number of ways. They can get through a hole in the fence. Gates get left open. Sometimes we don't find them all when we move them to different areas."

Ryan started brushing Skipper. "Walt says you're bringing in a consultant," he said without looking at Ellison.

"My uncle is."

"Do your aunt and uncle plan to take residence soon?"

"They'd originally planned to move to the ranch at the end of the summer, but my uncle recently took a promotion instead of retiring." Ellison's expression told him that she wasn't one bit surprised that her uncle had chosen work over retirement. "Now he's chief of staff at his hospital and the move has been pushed back."

"And you're here to hold down the fort."

"Milo wanted someone from the family here while the consultant did his evaluation."

"And you happened to be at loose ends."

"Yes," she said, meeting his eyes as if daring him to ask more. A nerve touched there.

Tempting as it was, he decided not to press matters. "Do you know anything about this consultant?"

"He comes highly recommended."

"By?"

"One of the neighboring ranchers." He cocked his head and she added, "The Kenyons."

"Is his name George Monroe?"

"You know him?" Ellison asked.

"I'm familiar," he said flatly.

"You don't seem too pleased."

Ryan turned toward her, keeping one hand on Skipper's damp back. "I don't know how to say this politely, so I'm just going to say it. The guy's a tool."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Why do you think that?"

"He fired a totally competent crew at the Vineyard and brought in another that was no better than the first. He shakes things up just because he can."

"That's your perception," Ellison replied calmly.

"Yes. That's my perception." Ryan tossed the brush into the bucket in the trailer tack room.

"One reason I'm here is to determine if I agree with his recommendations."

Was she trying to make him feel better? If so, it wasn't working. "By your own admission, you know nothing about ranching."

"I know about people and employee efficiency."

"But if you don't know this business, how can you judge its efficiency?"

Ellison's chin came up as he spoke, making it more than obvious that she didn't like being challenged any more than she liked being wrong.

"Efficiency is usually evident. Like, say, if someone leaves a gate open and then spends the entire day looking for the cattle that got out."

The first shot fired. All right. "They didn't get out through an open gate."

She settled a hand on her hip. "But if you mentioned the possibility, then I assume it has happened."

"Ranch gates are almost always left open by people who don't work on the ranch. Hikers. Hunters."

Her mouth made an O before she said, "Regardless, searching for lost animals doesn't seem the best use of time."

"Seem being the key word here, because, by your own admission, you don't know enough to make a judgment," Ryan pointed out reasonably, pulling his attention away from her lips.

"Then perhaps you could edify me."

"I'd be happy to," he said. "But not tonight." Even though it was only six o'clock, he had four hours of driving ahead of him.

"Plans?" she asked.

"Yeah." He didn't elaborate and after a few seconds Ellison nodded.

"I won't keep you," she said, her cool demeanor slipping back into place. She gave him a faint smile, then turned and walked back toward the house.

Ryan coiled Skipper's lead rope and then, despite his best intentions, glanced over the horse's broad back to watch Ellison retreat, feeling an unexpected twinge of regret. He could have made some inroads into her good graces, since it appeared that she'd come to the barn just to talk. But once George's name came up, everything had gone to hell, which was probably only a taste of what was going to happen once the consultant got there.

Ryan couldn't wait.

He heard the door to the main house close as he led Skipper toward the pasture. Ellison was back in her sanctuary, a place where he was fairly certain she was ready to climb the walls or she wouldn't be seeking out his company. She was lonely and because of that a few cracks seemed to be appearing in her walled-off facade.

He hated to admit it, but there was something about her touch-me-not quality that was drawing him in—no doubt the challenge of discovering if there was more to her than met the eye.

A challenge best not acted upon.

* * *

ELLIE GLANCED OUT the kitchen window and saw Ryan loading his black horse into the trailer. He disappeared into his house, then came out carrying a small gym bag and a cooler, stowed those in the front of his pickup and then drove away.

To where?

Did it matter? As long as he did his job, Ryan Madison was none of Ellie's concern...except that she was interested in where he was going so late with a horse and a cooler.

At least he had something to do. Tomorrow Ellie planned to touch base with some business acquaintances, let people know she'd be looking for a job soon, but at the moment she had nothing but TV to fill her time. Or she did until the wind suddenly rose around ten o'clock that night, howling through the trees and bending the birches in the front yard at an alarming angle. The lights flickered a couple times and then went out, leaving Ellie in the dark, staring in the direction of the blank TV screen and wondering how on earth she'd managed to get to this point in her life. It was then that she noticed that although the lights were off in the house, the yard light was still on. She was no expert, but that seemed wrong.

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