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HOME TO WYOMING

DADDY DUDE RANCH

REBECCA WINTERS

Rebecca Winters
Home to Wyoming

«HarperCollins»

Winters R.

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Wounded in love and war, ex-Marine Buck Summerhayes wants to put the past behind him. He finds peace working at the Teton Valley Dude Ranch, a special place for families of fallen soldiers. Maybe one day, he'll have a family of his own—right now he can't afford to indulge in dreams. Alexis Wilson is no dream. Tasked with overseeing Alex and her young ward during their visit to the ranch, Buck finds himself falling for both the woman and the little girl. Like Buck, Alex has had more than her share of heartache. But maybe between them, they can build a future that's still full of possibilities.

It's Never Too Late

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Buck's eyes seemed to focus on her mouth

"In that case, I'll come inside with you. While you put the things you bought away, I'll make us some instant coffee. I could do with a cup."

Alex's heart thumped. This was something she knew she should avoid, but after all he'd done for them, she didn't dare offend him. "Well...I won't say no to that."

As they went inside with her packages, the feeling grew stronger that she'd been on a date with him, and now they were coming home to spend the rest of the evening together. But she had to remember this was the middle of the afternoon and it wasn't a date!

For one thing, he was probably ten years younger than she, despite his maturity. For another, in the absence of Jenny's father, it was Buck's job to make certain this turned into a real vacation for her granddaughter, nothing more. She wished to heaven she could see it that way, but he'd managed to get under her skin. The only way to get him out was to leave Wyoming, but she and Jenny had only just arrived!

Dear Reader,

In Home to Wyoming, our bachelor hero rancher cannot believe that the gorgeous woman who comes to the Daddy Dude Ranch is a grandmother, raising her adorable seven-year-old granddaughter. Her age may not concern ex-marine Buck Summerhayes, but Alexis Wilson's engagement to another man does! What can he do to convince Alex she is the woman for him?

I hope you'll read this novel and experience all the thrills and chills of this love affair involving an unlikely couple who discover they are made for each other.

Enjoy!

Rebecca Winters

Home to Wyoming

Rebecca Winters



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Winters, whose family of four children has now swelled to include five beautiful grandchildren, lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the land of the Rocky Mountains. With canyons and high alpine meadows full of wildflowers nearby, she never runs out of places to explore. These spaces, plus her favorite vacation spots in Europe, often end up as backgrounds for her romance novels. Writing is her passion, along with her family and church. Rebecca loves to hear from readers. If you wish to email her, please visit her website, www.cleanromances.com.

Dedicated to all the selfless, wonderful, heroic grandmothers raising grandchildren after raising their own children. What greater love can there be?

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[Chapter One](#)

The station wagon pulled up to the curb in front of the airport in Colorado Springs. “Son, won’t you please consider coming back home? I mean...for good.”

He knew what she meant. Buck Summerhayes stared into his mother’s pleading eyes before releasing the seat belt. They’d been through this half a dozen times since last March when he’d been given a medical discharge from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. The military had flown him home, where his family had been waiting to welcome him.

“You know I can’t do that, Mom,” he said, breaking into a cough. “I’ve made a commitment to Carson and Ross. I only flew here for a three-day break. Now I have to get back to Wyoming. Another family of a fallen soldier from California will be arriving in Jackson this evening. The guys and I take turns. This family will be my main responsibility for the next week, so I have to be there to pick them up.”

“I realize that, but you have no idea how much we all miss you. Your father and brothers could use you in the business. At his last physical, the doctor told Dad he needed to slow down.”

“Is it anything serious?” Buck asked in alarm.

“No, darling. He’s just getting older, and all I’m saying is that Summerhayes Construction could use your help.” Her face took on a sad expression. “Is it possible you’re still staying away because of Melanie?”

A mother wasn’t a mother for nothing. There was no point in avoiding the subject of Melanie Marsden, his high school girlfriend and the woman he’d hoped to marry after college.

But after his oldest brother, Pete, told him she and his brother Sam had fallen in love while Buck had been away at school and that they were afraid to tell him, he wished them all the best. After their wedding, he’d joined the marines and it would have become his lifelong career if he hadn’t been diagnosed with acute dyspnea.

He frowned. “That might have been the case twelve years ago, but the war changed my life. When you see your buddies blown up in front of your face, it changes the way you think about things. I got over it a long time ago. Don’t you remember? When I was first sent overseas, I wrote them a letter telling them how happy I was for them?”

“Yes, of course. They told me what you did after you were deployed and it meant the world to them, but I was just afraid that because you haven’t met a woman to settle down with—”

“You thought I was still pining for her?” He cut her off. Incredulous, he said, “Mom—put your fears away. That’s in the long-forgotten past. There’ve been many women since then and there will be many more to come. Jackson Hole is a mecca for Western goddesses decked out in cowboy hats and spurs.”

His comment caused her to laugh. “If you want to know the truth, I love what I’m doing now. I need it.”

She patted his cheek. “I believe you.”

“I’m glad you do, because you don’t know what survivor’s guilt is like. When I was in the hospital, it tore me apart to think that some of our buddies didn’t make it home to their wives and children. My friends and I decided the only way to get over it was to find a way to help people. Carson

came up with the idea of turning his ranch into a dude ranch to give some of the victims' families a vacation. It struck a chord with Ross and me.”

“It’s a very noble idea, but what about your health?”

“We all see the doctor regularly. It could’ve been a lot worse. We like to think of it as our mark of bravery for breathing all that nasty stuff over in Afghanistan.”

She leaned across and gave him a big hug and a kiss. “I love you, honey.” Her voice was filled with tears.

Emotion swamped him as he reciprocated. “I love you, too. Stop worrying so much. I’ll see you in six weeks.”

He was saying that now, but he couldn’t guarantee it. Their dude-ranch business for regular tourists was growing faster than they’d anticipated. As for their first experiment entertaining a war widow and her son, it had gone so well that Carson had just married Tracy Baretta, and her six-year-old son Johnny was the cutest little kid Buck had ever seen.

It seemed unbelievable that she’d flown out from Ohio at the beginning of June and now they were man and wife and raising a child together. It was only the third week of July. Johnny would be celebrating his seventh birthday next Thursday night. Carson and Tracy were in the middle of planning a big party for him.

In truth, Buck was envious of Carson. Bachelorhood was all right until the right woman came along, but Buck could see how fulfilling it would be to be a father and he felt that yearning growing stronger. Johnny had gotten to Buck in a big way.

Buck smiled when he thought about Carson. The second he’d laid eyes on Tracy, the ultimate bachelor cowboy was a goner. He couldn’t be happier for his friend, but his nuptials had cut their numbers to an overall bachelor status of two.

After getting out of the car, he reached for his duffel bag on the backseat. “Drive safely, Mom. You’re the only mother I’ve got. And please, don’t worry. One day the right woman will come along and I’ll get married and give you grandchildren.”

“Oh, you.” She chuckled. “Take care, my brave boy.”

He was still her boy instead of a thirty-five-year-old vet with an annoying disease. As for brave, there were degrees of bravery. Like the heroism of one of their buddies who volunteered to be a target to save half a dozen of their platoon. He’d saved Buck’s life. Now, that was brave.

Buck shook his head after watching his mother pull away, and then he hurried inside to make his afternoon flight to Jackson via Denver.

His forty-minute trip went smoothly, but after changing planes for the second leg, the pilot made an announcement. Bad weather and high winds over Wyoming meant their flight had to be diverted to Salt Lake.

Terrific.

Once he arrived at Salt Lake International to check his bag, he phoned Carson and Ross, but got voice mail for both and had to leave messages. Frustrated, he called the front desk at the ranch and was able to reach Willy and tell him about the delay. The part-time apprentice mechanic who alternated shifts with Susan and Patty told him not to worry. Alexis and Jenny Forrester—the mother and daughter he was supposed to meet—would probably be late, too. But no matter when they arrived, someone on staff would pick them up. Buck was to give them a call whenever he touched down.

Rather than sit it out in the passenger waiting area, he found a Starbucks on the lower level and grabbed a sandwich and coffee and a copy of *The Salt Lake Tribune*. The place was packed with tourists. A lot of flights had been delayed. After he’d eaten, he went back upstairs and walked behind the last row of lounge seats until he came to the end where he found a free one. In the next chair was a blonde girl, maybe six or seven years old, curled up asleep next to her mother.

After sitting, he opened his newspaper to the business section. Unlike many other states, Utah was experiencing some growth of new housing in an otherwise depressed economy. He hoped things would pick up in Colorado, but it probably wouldn't happen for some time.

Beside him, Buck could hear the mother talking to someone on her cell phone. "I know a week seems like a long time, but it's something I feel I had to do for a lot of reasons....You know why....Please try to understand, Frank....Love you, too."

The call ended just as Buck had finished the editorial page. When he felt a spasm coming on, he coughed into the newspaper to muffle the sound, hoping he hadn't startled the little girl, who straightened in her seat and rubbed her eyes.

"Now that you're awake, let's go to the restroom, sweetheart," the mother said in a well-modulated voice. Buck would bet it wasn't a coincidence that she'd made the suggestion at that particular moment. Chagrined to think he was probably the reason they got up, he kept his face hidden behind the paper and flipped to the financial section.

The guys had joked about wearing signs that said their coughs weren't contagious; maybe it wasn't such a bad idea.

When he'd finished reading the paper, he tucked it between him and the side of the chair. As he sat leaning forward with his hands clasped between his knees, waiting for the announcement that his flight was now boarding, the little girl walked in front of him to take her seat.

Behind her came the most gorgeous pair of long legs he'd ever seen on a woman. Her linen-colored skirt fit snugly around shapely hips and legs to flare at the knee, and she was wearing beige wedge sandals.

Compelled to look up, he took in the top half of her shapely body clothed in a summery crocheted top. Her wavy chestnut-colored hair hid her profile as she sat down next to her daughter. Surprised by his strong reaction to the stranger, it took all the willpower he possessed not to stand so he could get a better look at her. No one appreciated a beautiful woman more than he did.

When he'd told his mom there'd been many women in his life, he hadn't exaggerated, which was why he was so surprised that this particular female had so captured his attention. It appeared that she and her daughter were taking his flight, but that didn't mean Jackson was their final destination. The mother and daughter he was supposed to meet were flying in from Sacramento, California—could they have been rerouted to Salt Lake City, as well?

In the middle of his reverie, he heard the announcement that his flight was ready for boarding. The woman and her daughter had already gone ahead to join the lineup. He was the last one to board the midsize passenger plane. Since his flight had been diverted, he was the last to be given a seat assignment and had to sit at the rear of the plane.

Before he reached his seat, he spotted the mother who'd caught his eye sitting on the left a couple of rows ahead. She was helping her daughter with the seat belt. He noted there was no wedding ring on her left hand. She could still be married, he surmised, or then again Frank—the man she'd been talking to on the phone earlier—could be a boyfriend. Buck was forced to keep moving down the aisle and he still didn't get a look at her face, because her hair had fallen forward.

The flight was a short one, but bumpy toward the end. After the plane landed, three-fourths of the passengers got off, but he saw no sign of the woman and her daughter. Oddly disappointed, he made his way over to the baggage claim to retrieve his duffel bag and call the ranch.

"Buck!"

He wheeled around to see Willy carrying a sign for the Teton Valley Dude Ranch. "Hey, Willy."

The twenty-six-year-old pushed his cowboy hat back on his head. "I didn't know you'd be on this flight. You didn't by any chance see a woman and little girl on board, did you? The Forresters didn't come in on the last flight. I was supposed to pick them up in front, but they weren't outside, so I figured they'd be in here getting their luggage. Some of the bags still haven't been claimed."

So the woman and her daughter were the Forresters!

After overhearing part of her phone conversation with “Frank,” he’d pretty much ruled her out as possibly being the widow of Daniel Forrester.

The marine’s heroism had been lauded after he’d taken a grenade to save members of his platoon from certain death. He’d been buried only nine months ago. Not that his wife couldn’t have found herself in another relationship this fast. The woman was a raving beauty.

Come to think of it, Melanie and Buck’s brother had gotten close much faster than that while he’d been away at school. But Melanie hadn’t lost a husband in the war. Somehow, Buck would have expected a grieving widow to take a little longer to recover. The woman had already removed her wedding ring. Still, it was none of his business.

“I sat next to a mother and daughter in the airport lounge in Salt Lake, but I had no idea they were the family we’re hosting. Unfortunately, I was the last one off the plane.” He frowned, wondering if the turbulence had made one of them ill. They were his responsibility, after all. “Maybe they’re in the restroom. Stay here.”

He started across the terminal lounge to look around when he saw them come out of an alcove and head for the luggage carousel. The little girl clung to her mother’s hand. Buck closed in on them.

“Mrs. Forrester?”

She swung halfway around, giving him the frontal view he’d been trying to glimpse earlier. Midnight-blue eyes connected with his. He thought she looked surprised to see him. She probably hadn’t expected the man with the cough at the Salt Lake airport to be the one greeting her.

She was maybe thirty. A generously curved mouth and high cheekbones were set in an oval face. Her classic features appealed to him as much as the rest of her. She was a very attractive woman. He thought of Carson and the way he’d felt when he’d first laid eyes on Tracy.

Damn.

He looked down at her daughter, who showed all the promise of growing up to be a beauty herself. “I’m Buck Summerhayes, one of the partners at the dude ranch. Welcome to Teton Valley.” He shook her hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Summerhayes. We’re very happy to be here.” Although her tone sounded cordial enough, she seemed a bit subdued. Maybe the flight had made her ill.

“Let me introduce Willy Felder. He’s one of our staff and will be taking us back to the ranch.”

“My name’s Alex. How do you do?” She shook hands with him.

“If you’ll tell Willy which of those bags are yours, he’ll take them out to the van.”

“They’re the red ones.”

“Red’s my favorite color,” the little girl piped up.

Buck smiled. “So I can see.” He squatted in front of her. She was wearing jeans and a red top with a princess on the front. “It’s nice to meet you, Jennifer. I’m glad you’re coming to the ranch. I forget—are you six or seven?”

“Seven.”

“Jenny had a birthday last week,” her mother explained.

“Well, congratulations, Jenny!” he said. “The owner of the dude ranch, Carson Lundgren, has a son named Johnny who’s going to turn seven next Thursday. You’ll meet him at breakfast in the morning. He’ll want to show you his pony, Goldie.”

“I’ve never seen a real pony.”

“We’ve got four of them.”

“Can I have a ride on one?”

He smiled. “You can pick your favorite and start riding first thing in the morning. Do you know you have the prettiest green eyes?”

“So do you.” Her comment took him by surprise. She seemed so grown up for a seven-year-old. “My daddy’s were green, too.”

“That explains their color.” A lump lodged in his throat. This was Daniel Forrester’s little girl, who would have to live without him for the rest of her life. “Your daddy was a very brave man. We invited you to the ranch as our way of honoring him.”

Her features sobered, but she didn’t tear up. “Were you in the war?”

“Yes.”

“How come you’re not there now?”

“That’s a good question. It’s because I got sick while I was in Afghanistan and had to come home. So did my friends Carson and Ross who run the ranch. They have coughs, too.”

“I heard you coughing at the airport.”

“I saw you sleeping, and I’m sorry if I woke you up. I cough a lot, but just remember you can’t catch it from me.”

“Why not?” She was curious like Johnny, a trait he found endearing.

“Because it’s not a cough from a cold. It’s from breathing the bad air in the war.”

She looked up at her mother with an anxious expression. “Do you think Daddy got that cough, too?”

“I don’t think so, or he would have said something in his emails.”

Jenny looked a trifle pale. The mention of her father must have upset her. “Let’s get going to the ranch. It’s only a short drive away. I’m sure you’re tired and hungry.”

“I got sick on the plane.”

That explained her pallor. “I’m sorry about that. Our plane did get bounced around, but we’re on the ground now. Are you thirsty?”

“Not yet.”

Buck got to his feet and turned to the girl’s mother. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He guessed that she couldn’t wait to get to the ranch and put her daughter to bed. “Then let’s go. The van’s right outside.”

When they exited the terminal into the darkness, the wind was blowing so fiercely it was a good thing he wasn’t wearing his cowboy hat. He saw lightning flashes followed by thunder. It was going to rain before they reached the ranch. Willy opened the van door to help Jenny and her mother get in. A strong gust caused her skirt to ride up those fabulous legs just as Buck climbed in behind her. Once behind the wheel, Willy pulled away. Two minutes later, the downpour started.

“Where’s that big mountain?” Jenny wanted to know. She rested her head against her mother, who had a protective arm around her. He noticed she squeezed her daughter harder every time there was another clap of thunder.

“The Grand Teton is to the right of us, but with the storm, you won’t be able to see it until tomorrow.”

“I’m scared.”

Willy had turned on the windshield wipers, but it was still hard to see.

“You don’t need to be, Jenny. We’re perfectly safe in the van, and in a few minutes we’ll have you tucked in bed in our cabin. You’ll be as cozy as the red squirrel who lives in a hole in the fir tree near the main ranch house.”

“It’s really red?”

When Buck smiled, Jenny’s mother reciprocated. “Not exactly like your top. More of a burnt-orange-red color. Moppy likes pine nuts.”

“Moppy?” Jenny squealed in delight, her fear forgotten for the moment.

“That’s Carson’s name for her.”

“I want to see her.”

“Tomorrow she’ll be running up and down the tree, chattering her head off. You won’t be able to miss her. She has a huge bushy tail.”

“What if it’s still raining tomorrow and she doesn’t come out?”

“By morning, this storm will be long gone.”

“Promise?”

Buck had checked his smartphone for the weather report before he’d exited the plane. He caught her mother’s eye before he said, “I promise the sun will be out.”

She kissed her daughter’s forehead. “If Mr. Summerhayes made a promise, then you can believe it, sweetheart.”

“Please, call me Buck.”

“That sounds like a horse’s name.”

Jenny’s comment made him laugh and brought on a cough. When it subsided, he said, “A lot of people say that and you’re absolutely right, but I was named Bradford after my great grandfather. My dad nicknamed me Buck because his grandfather liked the Buck Rogers comic books and thought I looked like him.”

“Who was Buck Rogers?”

“A spaceman.”

The girl glanced at her mom. “Have you heard of Buck Rogers?”

“Yes. I loved science fiction growing up.”

Buck had been enjoying their conversation so much, he didn’t realize they’d driven up in front of the guest cabin until Willy turned off the engine.

He leaned toward the two of them. “The worst of the storm has passed. I’ll unlock the cabin door and then you make a run for it so you don’t get too wet. Willy will bring in your luggage. But before we go in, I have to put on an oxygen mask.”

Jenny looked startled. “How come?”

“Because housekeeping has made a fire for you and smoke hurts my lungs. The guys and I have started carrying an oxygen apparatus in all our vehicles because we never know when we’ll need it.” He opened the small locker on the floor and pulled out a mask and canister. “Don’t be scared.”

“I won’t.”

“If my great grandfather saw me now, he’d think I really was Buck Rogers from outer space.” He put on the mask and turned on the oxygen before leaving the van. In a minute, he had the cabin door unlocked.

Jenny and her mother hurried over the threshold into the living room where the glow from the hearth illuminated their faces. Judging by their expressions, they found the cabin welcoming and moved closer to the heat source.

When he and the guys had built the cabins, they’d decided on wood-burning fireplaces for their authenticity.

“Ooh, this feels good, doesn’t it, sweetheart?”

“I wish our house had a fireplace.”

Pleased with their response to their temporary home away from home, Buck helped Willy take the bags into one of the two bedrooms adjoined by a bathroom. “Ladies,” he said as he came back to the living room, “you have all the comforts of home here. There’s a coffeemaker and microwave. The fridge is stocked with drinks and there’s a basket of fruit, along with packets of hot chocolate and snacks on the table. If you’ll look in the closets, there are extra pillows and blankets.”

“This is wonderful,” she exclaimed, looking around at the rest of the room, her eyes landing on the state-of-the-art entertainment center.

“If you need anything, just dial zero on the house phone by your bed and the front desk will let me know, no matter the hour.” He studied his guests. “Is there anything I can get you before I say good-night?”

Jenny stared up at him with a worried expression. “Do you feel okay?”

“I feel fine. Do I look too frightening?”

“No, but I feel bad for you. Where do you live?”

“In the main ranch house. It’s close by, but you couldn’t see it in the storm. I hope your stomach will feel better by morning. We serve breakfast in the big dining room from six to nine. Lunch is from twelve to two and dinner from five to eight.”

“Will you be there?”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

“That’s good.” Jenny’s quiet response touched him. “Do you have to wear the mask at the ranch house?”

“Only if they make a fire in the big fireplace, which doesn’t happen very often.”

“You’re brave.”

“No. Your dad was the one who was brave. If you’ve noticed, the thunder and lightning have already moved on. It isn’t scary anymore. I bet Moppy is already peeking out of her hole and planning her breakfast for tomorrow. The rain will have made a lot of pine nuts fall to the ground.”

The little girl’s face broke into a sweet smile. Daniel Forrester’s daughter was a treasure. It tore him up to think she’d lost her father. “I want to watch.”

He cleared his throat. “She’ll be up early.”

“I don’t know if we can say the same thing for us,” her mother remarked.

Buck was trying hard not to think too much about Daniel’s wife and his unwanted attraction to her. He threw her a glance. “Tomorrow will be your first day here. After coming from Sacramento, you need to get used to the altitude.”

“You can certainly tell the air is thinner here.”

“It’s a bit of a change and that flight had to be unsettling to a lot of the passengers. Jenny? You’re a courageous girl to have handled it. Something tells me you’re just like your daddy.”

When she didn’t say anything, he glanced at her mother and saw tears pooling in her dark blue eyes. “You don’t know how true that is.” Her comment piqued his curiosity, but now wasn’t the time to probe.

“Good night.”

“Good night, Mr. Summerhayes.”

“Buck.”

“Yes, Buck. Sorry.”

“No problem. What would you like me to call you?”

“Alex. It’s short for Alexis,” Jenny volunteered. “Frank calls her that, but she doesn’t like it.”

“Jenny—”

Amused, Buck’s gaze swerved back to the seven-year-old. “Who’s Frank?” Might as well learn the truth right now. Hopefully it would help kill his interest in her.

“He’s going to be my new grandpa.”

“You mean, your grandmother is getting married to Frank?”

“Yes. After we get back from our trip.”

“That’s an exciting thing to look forward to.”

The little girl’s face crumpled. “No, it isn’t.” Before he could blink, she ran out of the living room into the bedroom where he’d put their bags and shut the door.

Alex looked shattered. “I’m sorry. She’s been upset lately, but never around anyone other than me.”

“It’s probably just because she’s not feeling well and the storm scared her. I’ll leave so you can take care of her. I can show you around the ranch tomorrow.”

“Please don’t go yet. There’s something you need to know. I was going to tell you at the airport, but it didn’t feel like the right time. Jenny needs to cry this out and she’ll be fine by herself for a few minutes. I’m afraid this can’t wait.”

He felt her urgency. “What is it?”

“Do you mind if we sit down?”

Wondering what this was all about, Buck sat in one of the chairs, while she took the end of the couch. “I’ll make this as short as possible. My name is Alex Wilson. I’m Jenny’s grandmother, not her mother.”

Buck shot up from the chair. Grandmother? It wasn’t possible. She looked so young! His mind had to do a complete thought reversal.

“Two months after Daniel was killed, my daughter, Christy, died. She’d suffered from leukemia for a short time before her passing. I became Jenny’s legal guardian.”

A slug to the gut couldn’t have come as more of a shock.

“When the letter arrived from the Teton Valley Dude Ranch inviting Christy and Jenny to come, I was so touched you couldn’t imagine. But the invitation was meant for my daughter.” He heard tears in her voice.

“I called Daniel’s commanding officer so he could explain my situation to Mr. Lundgren—Carson—and tell him the reason why we couldn’t accept such a great honor. He told me that since I was Jenny’s legal guardian and had virtually raised her since Christy fell ill, no one had more of a right to come and bring Jenny than I did.

“I struggled with it. In fact, up to a week ago, I was ready to call the ranch and tell you about my daughter’s death. I wanted you to give this honor to a well-deserving widow and her child. But the commanding officer wouldn’t hear of it. By that time Jenny was so excited to come, I couldn’t disappoint her. With both her parents’ deaths, she’s been through so much grief. But I wanted you to know the truth.”

Buck couldn’t begin to fathom it. “I’m glad he insisted you come. After hearing what you’ve told me, I speak for Carson and Ross when I say we couldn’t be happier that Daniel Forrester’s daughter and mother-in-law have accepted our invitation. He was a real hero. We’re hoping this trip will let Jenny know how special we thought her father was.”

Her eyes glazed over. “You’re very kind, Buck. Daniel was a terrific son-in-law. My daughter couldn’t have chosen better. Which brings me to what happened tonight. I’m planning to be married to a man I met over two years ago. He’s been careful because of Jenny’s feelings and has only proposed recently.

“Jenny knows we’re planning marriage and I’d hoped she was getting used to the idea, but tonight’s outburst has shown me she’s not ready to share me with Frank yet. To be truthful, he was worried about my bringing her on this trip and is still unhappy about it. She adored her daddy and Frank thought meeting more ex-marines might be too painful a reminder of her loss.

“But she acted so excited about coming here that I couldn’t disappoint her. I’m embarrassed for the way she acted out just now. If I see any more of this behavior while we’re here, we’ll have to leave, and I’ll reimburse you for the airline tickets and any expense you’ve gone to for us.”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary. Once she meets Johnny, she’ll be so preoccupied that she’ll forget to be upset. There’s something about this ranch that gives people a new perspective.”

She stood and walked over to the door. “I hope you’re right. I can tell you one thing. You knew exactly how to calm Jenny’s fears tonight. For that, I’m indebted to you. Thank you for inviting us here. You’ll never know what that letter from the ranch did for me and Jenny. At a very dark hour for her, it gave us the hope that a brighter future was in store.”

Buck could hardly swallow for the sorrow he was feeling for their family. “I’m so glad it did that for you. Good night, Alex. See you in the morning.”

Without lingering, he hurried outside and whipped off his mask. After the rain, the scent of sage hung heavy in the air. Willy was waiting for him in the van. “Everything all right, Buck? You look...disturbed.”

He put his apparatus back in the locker. “To be honest, disturbed doesn’t come close to what I’m feeling.” His thoughts were in chaos.

Willy started driving them along the puddled dirt road toward the parking area at the side of the main ranch house. “Mrs. Forrester is a knockout.”

That she was. “Just so you know, her name is actually Alex Wilson. She’s Jenny Forrester’s grandmother.”

“Grandmother—” At that revelation, Willy pressed on the brakes and looked at him. “Come on... You’re joshing me, right? How could she be a grandmother?”

Buck’s eyebrows lifted. “I don’t know. I’ve been trying to do the math. Her granddaughter just turned seven.” He could hear Willy’s brain working.

“She would have to be forty or damn near close.”

“Yep.” But she could pass for ten years younger and was planning to get married. “Her daughter died soon after Daniel Forrester was killed by a grenade.”

Quiet reigned until they reached the ranch house. “That’s awful. The poor little kid.”

“You can say that again.” They’d both suffered too many losses. Buck opened the door. “Thanks for the lift, Willy. See you tomorrow.”

Buck entered the ranch through the front door, coughing his way back to the office to find the guys. What he had to tell them would blow their minds. During those weeks in the hospital when they’d come up with the idea to run a dude ranch to honor soldiers’ families, Buck could never have dreamed up a scenario like this one.

Chapter Two

Relieved that Buck Summerhayes knew the truth about everything, Alex locked up and walked back to the bedroom. Jenny was lying on top of one of the twin beds with her head buried in the pillow. Alex sat at her side and started rubbing her back.

“Did Buck leave?”

“Yes.”

“I wish he didn’t have to go. He’s nice.”

“I agree, but it’s late. He needs his sleep and so do you. Before he left, I told him about your mom.”

“I’m so glad we came. Do you think he’s in pain?”

“No. As long as he doesn’t breathe smoke, I’m sure he’s fine.”

“I like him.”

“I know.”

“He has pretty green eyes. They’re lighter than Daddy’s.”

“You’re right.”

With his full head of thick light brown hair and his well-defined physique, Buck Summerhayes was undeniably an attractive man—and he had a way about him that had charmed her granddaughter. She suspected he charmed most females. Alex hadn’t seen a wedding band. Since he hadn’t mentioned a wife or children, Alex presumed he was still a bachelor.

“I have something to tell you that will make you happier, but you have to turn over so we can look at each other.”

Jenny flipped over on her back. “What is it?”

“When we go home, I’m going to tell Frank I’m not ready to marry him yet.”

She sat up straight. “You’re not?”

“No. You and I need more time.” Tonight’s outburst in front of a stranger had given her ample proof that it was too soon for any more changes in Jenny’s life.

The girl’s slim arms caught Alex around the neck in a powerful hug. “I love you, Nana!”

“I love you too, sweetheart. How does your tummy feel now? Would you like a soda?”

“Yes, please.”

“Good. I’ll see what I can find.”

Alex went in the other room and opened the minifridge. There were a variety of drinks. She drew out a ginger ale and a cola. Before she went back to the bedroom, she checked on the fire. It was burning down. With the screen in place, she didn't need to worry about sparks catching something on fire.

"Here you go." Alex sat on the other twin bed and pulled out the brochure that had been included with the letter she'd received from the dude ranch. Together they made plans for the next day while they drank their sodas.

She knew Frank was waiting for her to call him, but for the first time, she didn't feel like talking to him. He hadn't wanted her to come to the ranch, and Jenny was thrilled to be there. Alex felt as if she was in a tug-of-war. It took too much emotional energy. Instead of calling, she reached for her cell phone and texted him that they'd arrived safely but were exhausted. She'd phone him tomorrow. Alex meant it about being worn out.

With that decision made, she and Jenny opened their suitcases to get out the things they'd need for bed, including the framed photograph of Jenny's parents that Alex placed on the telephone table for her.

"We'll put everything else away in the morning," she said. After brushing their teeth, they said their prayers, and then she turned out the lights and they climbed under their comfy quilts. Alex liked their yellow-and-white-checkered design. The whole log cabin had a cheery ambience. There was no doubt that she and Jenny needed a little cheer in their lives.

In her heart of hearts, she was relieved about the decision she'd made where Frank was concerned. Alex had refused to wear his engagement ring yet because deep down she'd known Jenny wasn't ready. She'd seen the signs, but tonight's incident had crystallized things for her.

Marriage was a big step for anyone, but an even bigger one for a woman who'd be forty-one in a few months and had never been married. Frank was fifty-five but looked fifty because he played a lot of tennis and kept fit. They'd met when she'd started working at the bank where he was the vice president. After he lost his wife to cancer, they became friends. That friendship deepened following Christy's death and they fell in love.

She liked his two married children and grandchildren. He had a maturity and stability that were especially appealing to her. Jenny liked him fairly well, but the mention of marriage was something else. Obviously it was too soon after her daddy's death for her to imagine a man living with them under the same roof.

Alex knew it would come as a blow when she got home and told Frank she couldn't marry him yet. For her, intimacy was out of the question until their wedding, because she refused to anticipate their vows as she'd done with Kyle when she was seventeen.

Although she hated the thought of disappointing Frank further, Jenny had to come first. Alex had raised one daughter, and now she was raising another. The responsibility was enormous. Frank would help her, but not until Jenny was ready. And as much as Alex was looking forward to marriage, they had to get past this problem first. She guessed she was going to find out how patient Frank could be.

With a troubled sigh, she turned on her other side. When Jenny had been in the first grade, Alex had arranged various playdates for her. One girl named Mandy was turning into a friend Jenny really liked. They got along great, but she needed more friends. She hoped that she would make some friends at the ranch for the time that they were there. Maybe there would be some other families with a girl. And Buck had mentioned a boy....

She and Jenny had been through so much in the past year, but if there was any consolation, it was that her daughter and Daniel were together in heaven. Alex loved her granddaughter and was determined they were going to have a wonderful life and enjoy this special week, which had come as an unexpected gift.

To her surprise, her thoughts drifted to the handsome ex-marine who'd flown on the plane with them to Jackson. Who would have guessed he was one of the owners of the dude ranch.

Buck's words rang in her ears: There's something about this ranch that gives you a new perspective. She had the feeling he'd been speaking from personal experience and prayed it would be equally true for her and Jenny.

* * *

"NANA? Somebody's knocking at the door. Do you think it's Buck?" Jenny asked with an eagerness that surprised Alex.

"I have no idea." Alex had awakened thinking about him and how good he'd been with Jenny last night. She knew married men who didn't handle their own children's fears as well as the way he'd handled Jenny's. She shot up in bed and brushed the hair out of her eyes to check her watch. It was five after eight.

There was another knock. "Can I get it?"

"Go ahead." Alex had slept in her sweats and felt decent enough as she followed Jenny into the other room. Her granddaughter had inherited the best features from both Christy and Daniel. She looked so cute in her Sleeping Beauty pajamas. Alex thought she was the most adorable girl on the planet.

When Jenny opened the door, they were met by a brown-eyed, brown-haired boy in a black Stetson and cowboy boots. He wore a holster around his hips and was holding a cap gun in one hand. Alex decided she was looking at the most adorable boy on the planet.

"Hi! I'm Johnny Lundgren. Are you Jenny?" Her granddaughter's green eyes widened in astonishment before she nodded. "Do you want to have breakfast with me?"

She turned to Alex. "Would that be okay with you, Nana?"

"Of course." She moved to the door. "Hi, Johnny. I'm Alex."

"I know. You're her grandmother."

Alex couldn't help smiling. He had amazing confidence for his age. "That's right. Last night Buck told us you're Mr. Lundgren's son."

"Yep."

"We're very pleased to meet you." She shook his hand. "We understand you have a pony named Goldie."

"Yep. I'll show you to her after breakfast. Do you want to see me ride her?"

"Yes. I want to ride, too."

"Okay. We'll go after we eat. I like Fruit Loops. What about you?"

Jenny thought for a minute. "Do they have Boo Berry?"

"I think so, but it makes your mouth blue."

"I know." Both children laughed at the same time. A small miracle had occurred with her granddaughter. Buck Summerhayes wasn't the only male around the ranch who had charm. "Come on in, Johnny. We'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Thanks."

"Where did you get your cap gun?"

"In Jackson. Maybe your nana will buy one for you."

Jenny turned to her. "Would you?"

"We'll see. First we need to get dressed."

"Okay."

Alex hustled Jenny into the bedroom. They took turns quickly showering, and then both dived into their suitcases for jeans and tops. She guessed that Buck was behind this and knew what he was doing. Here Alex had been hoping there'd be a girl for Jenny to play with, but Johnny Lundgren was so cute and interesting that he had her granddaughter mesmerized. Better strike while the iron was hot.

In fewer than twenty minutes, they'd freshened up and brushed their hair. "I think we're ready." They joined Johnny and the three of them stepped out of the cabin. The Teton mountain range rose majestically in the distance. The sight of it in the sunshine took Alex's breath away. You would never have known there'd been a storm last night.

"There's the big mountain!" Jenny cried, pointing to it. You couldn't miss it.

"Yep. That's the Grand Teton."

"What does Teton mean?" The question didn't surprise her. Her granddaughter was the most observant, curious person Alex had ever known.

Johnny looked puzzled. "I'll have to ask Dad."

"Have you ever seen anything more beautiful, sweetheart?"

"I didn't know it was so tall!"

Alex looked all around. There were a few other cabins besides their own, and they were all surrounded by sagebrush. A distance away, she could see the main ranch house—a big rustic two-story affair with a copse of trees to the side. It was the type of home the man on the horse in the Great American Cowboy ad might live in. Alex was being fanciful, but this ranch was the kind of place dreams were made of.

The children moved ahead of her as they walked along the road.

Johnny turned to Jenny. "Do you want to camp out on the mountain?"

"Have you done it?"

"A couple of times."

"Is it scary?"

"Only once, when we got caught in a storm."

"I don't like storms."

"It was okay. Dad was with me. We stayed in our tent and drank hot chocolate until it was over."

Alex caught up to them. "That sounds fun."

Jenny's expression sobered. "I don't have a dad anymore."

"I know."

Her blond head lifted. "You do?"

"Yep. I know all about you. Your daddy was a marine like mine, and they both got killed in the war."

"But I thought you said you went hiking with your dad."

"I meant my new dad."

After a pause, Jenny said, "Your mom got married again?"

"Yep. To Carson."

"Do you like him?"

"He's my favorite person in the whole world besides my dad."

Alex knew what her granddaughter was thinking. Frank wasn't her favorite person in the world, but she didn't say it out loud, for which Alex was grateful.

Suddenly a lovely blonde woman in a blouse and jeans came walking around the side of the building where Alex could see half a dozen vehicles of different kinds were parked. "There you are, Johnny. I was just coming to look for you."

"I'm afraid it's our fault." Alex smiled at her. "Jenny and I needed to get showered and dressed while he waited for us. You must be Johnny's mother."

"Yes. I'm Tracy Lundgren and you have to be Alex Wilson. Welcome to the ranch." They shook hands.

"Thank you. Your son makes a wonderful guide. We're thrilled to be here."

"No more than we are to have you." She walked over to Jenny. "Buck told us you just had your seventh birthday. Johnny's turning seven next week. It's an amazing coincidence. You'll have to

come to his party. We're going to go into Jackson to the Funorama. They have all kinds of slides and games, and you can eat all the pizza you want."

Johnny eyed Jenny. "Do you like pizza?"

She nodded. "It's my favorite food."

"Mine, too."

"I like pepperoni."

"Me, too."

Alex and Tracy exchanged amused glances. Johnny's mother was probably in her late twenties and seemed so friendly. Christy would have liked her. Alex's heart ached for what her daughter was missing, but today wasn't the time to be sad. Johnny's arrival at their front door had brought its own brand of sunshine, something they badly needed.

"Which tree does Moppy live in?"

Johnny looked surprised. "How do you know about her?"

"Buck told me last night."

He ran over to a big fir. "See that hole?"

Jenny moved closer. "Do you think she's inside?"

"I don't know. When she hears voices, she hides. We'll come back after breakfast and sneak up on her."

"Okay."

They rounded the corner to enter the main doors of the lobby. Suddenly Jenny cried, "Look, Nana—"

Alex turned in time to see what had to be the biggest moose head ever. It was mounted above the door frame. "My heavens—he's enormous."

Johnny tilted his hat back. "Dad calls him Mathoozela."

"Mathoozela?" At this point Jenny's eyes had rounded. "I never heard that name before."

"It's because he was so old when he died."

By now Tracy's shoulders were shaking along with Alex's. She put an arm around her granddaughter's shoulders. "The Bible says Methusela was the oldest man who ever lived."

"Yep. Dad says he lived to be 969 years. He thinks maybe that's how old this moose got to be."

"Maybe he's even older," sounded a male voice behind them.

"Dad!"

Alex watched as the attractive dark blond Stetson-wearing cowboy gave his stepson a bear hug before picking him up. "So, introduce me."

"This is Jenny Forrester and that's her nana, Alex. My dad's name is Carson."

Carson Lundgren smiled, his eyes a bright blue. "Welcome to the ranch." He coughed. "We've been waiting for you, especially when we found out your granddaughter was the same age as Johnny. The more kids around here, the better."

Alex agreed. "We're very excited to be here." What wasn't there about these people to like?

"Our other partner Ross would be here, but he's on an overnight pack trip with some of our guests. You'll meet him tomorrow."

After the greetings were over, Carson put Johnny back down and curled an arm around his wife's waist. They appeared to be crazy about each other. Alex remembered being in love like that with Christy's father once, but once she told him she was pregnant, she never saw him again.

Jenny looked up at him. "Is Buck here?"

"Did I hear someone say my name?"

At the sound of the deep, familiar male voice, Alex spun around to see the former marine walk toward them from a doorway beyond the front-desk area. Last night he'd been wearing a jacket and chinos. This morning he was dressed in cowboy boots, a Western shirt and jeans that molded his powerful thighs. His rugged good looks caused her pulse to race for no good reason.

“I did.” Jenny smiled up at him. “But we didn’t see Moppy this morning.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll catch her after dinner when she doesn’t think anyone is watching. Have you had breakfast yet?” Jenny shook her head. “Are you hungry?” She nodded. “Good. Then let’s go in the dining room. We could eat the three big trout I caught early this morning.”

“You did?” Jenny looked amazed.

“Do you know what a trout is?” Johnny asked her.

“Yes, it’s fish.”

Alex was glad her granddaughter could hold her own on something. Mirth filled Buck’s green eyes as he lifted them to Alex, bringing on an unexpected rush of adrenaline. What on earth was wrong with her? “How about you?”

“One medium trout sounds delicious.”

His low chuckle traveled to her insides. “I caught a couple of those, too.” He turned to Carson. “Are you going to join us?”

“I’m afraid I’ve got a meeting with the stockmen, but I’ll try to catch up with you at the barn later in the day.” Alex remembered reading that the dude ranch was also a cattle ranch. These men led busy lives. He hugged Johnny again. “Have you got a pony picked out for Jenny yet?”

He whispered to his father. Carson nodded. “Good choice.”

“Hey, Dad? Jenny wants to know what Teton means.”

Suddenly both men broke out in wide grins. “I’ll leave that to your mom to explain. Got to run.”

“Coward,” Tracy said to her husband with a grin as he kissed her. “Come on, everyone. We need to eat breakfast while we still can.”

The five of them walked through the great room with its floor-to-ceiling fireplace and entered the main dining room. Wagon-wheel chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Alex saw several families seated with older teenagers. Only one table was empty. All of them were covered in red-and-white-checked cloths with white daisies forming the centerpieces. Alex loved the decor.

Once they were seated and had been served their orders, Buck looked at Alex and Jenny. “Last night you were too tired for me to tell you much about the ranch. Carson Lundgren’s great-great-grandfather purchased this land in 1908 and turned it into the Teton Valley Ranch where they ran cattle and we still do, today.

“His grandparents raised him and he became a rodeo champion known as ‘King of the Cowboys.’ Since I went into business with him and Ross Livingston, we’ve also begun operating the ranch as a dude ranch for tourists who make reservations with us and are paying guests. But once a month we use part of the money to invite one war widow and her children to stay with us. You two are our honored guests for this week and have access to all the facilities free of charge.”

“We’re thrilled to be here,” Alex exclaimed. “Jenny and I read the brochure. You offer so many activities we can’t believe it. I think it would be impossible to do them all.”

He chuckled. “Most everyone wants to try horseback riding, so you’ll probably want to invest in some Western gear. We also offer fishing. If you want to go down the Snake River in a raft or a kayak, we’ll take you. Some people want to do mountain climbing or go hiking.

“We also have a swimming pool off the games room on the other side of the dining room. Ping-Pong, cards, television—it’s all at your disposal. We plan pack trips to the lake for overnight campouts and there are hot-air-balloon rides you can enjoy over Jackson Hole. You can also attend the Jackson Rodeo if that appeals to you. If you need a car, we’ll provide you with one so you can go into town to shop, see a movie or try out one of the restaurants.

“Housekeeping makes up your cabins and supplies you with laundry service. Just put what needs washing or cleaning in the laundry bag under the sink and leave it on the peg of the door. It’ll be returned to you later in the day.

“As the brochure explained, this is also a cattle ranch with a foreman and stockmen. They work up on the mountain with the cattle. If Jenny wants to see the herd, that can be arranged, too.”

Alex smiled at him. "I'm still trying to take it all in."

"What do you think you want to do first?"

Jenny glanced at Alex. "Can we go buy me a cap gun like Johnny's?"

Buck chuckled. "Sure we can. I'll drive us into Jackson and we'll get you some other stuff, too."

"Can I go?" Johnny eyed his mother for permission.

"If it's all right with Buck."

"We couldn't get along without him."

"Be sure to mind Buck and be helpful." Tracy gave her son a kiss and excused herself. "I'm overseeing some heavy-duty cleaning. I'll see all of you later."

She left and Buck finished off a second trout and hash browns with another cup of coffee. Alex was already full from her fish and biscuits. "That was delicious."

"That's good," Buck said, smiling at her. "Johnny? Are you about ready to go?"

"Yep."

"Why don't you come and help me unload some supplies from the truck? Then we'll pick you ladies up at your cabin in, say, half an hour."

Alex nodded. "That sounds perfect." She needed to phone Frank before they went into town.

Johnny slid off his chair. "See you guys soon."

"Okay." Jenny ate her last spoonful of cereal. "We'll be ready."

"Hey—you've got blue teeth."

They both giggled.

Alex hadn't heard such a happy sound come out of her granddaughter in a long time. She herself felt lighter as the four of them parted company outside and they made their way back to the cabin.

"Why didn't Johnny's dad tell us what Teton means?"

She remembered the way Buck's eyes lit up and the way it made her feel—as if little sunbursts had exploded inside her. "Well, it's only a guess, but I imagine the range got its name from the Indians and early trappers who thought those peaks reminded them of a woman. You know what I mean?"

Alex had learned early that the unvarnished truth was the only way to get her granddaughter off a subject. Euphemisms didn't work with her.

"Oh." Jenny's eyes twinkled as she looked at Alex. Sometimes, she seemed older than seven. "Do you think Johnny knows?" They'd reached the cabin and went inside.

"No, or he wouldn't have asked his father in front of everyone. One day his dad will tell him."

In the midst of their illuminating conversation, her phone rang, interrupting a special moment. Frank. He had to be wondering why she hadn't phoned him yet. It was because Johnny had wakened them out of a sound sleep and they'd rushed to make breakfast on time.

"Jenny? Be sure to brush your teeth."

"I will. Nana? Will you tell Frank what we talked about last night?"

Oh, Jenny. Nothing got past her granddaughter.

* * *

JOHNNY HELPED BUCK unload some supplies at the new house Carson was having built on the property for his family down near the Snake River. So far everyone was living in the ranch house with Buck and Ross upstairs, and Carson and his family on the main floor.

Buck had been overseeing the construction. After the foundation had been poured, he'd spent the next three days on a brief vacation in Colorado Springs with his family while he waited for it to settle. He hadn't seen his parents since March. Now it was back to work.

He talked with the construction workers who'd already started the framing. When everything appeared under control, he shoved his cowboy hat back on his head and turned to Johnny. "Come on. Let's go get the girls." They walked back to the truck and climbed in.

"Jenny's nana isn't a girl."

"You're right, but she doesn't look like any grandma I ever met."

“I know. My Grandma Baretta looks a lot, lot older.”

Buck was having a devil of a time coming to grips with that fact. He started the engine and they took off.

“Hey—can we go to town in the Jeep? It’s more fun.”

“Sure.”

“Will you take the top off?”

“Why not.” According to the weather forecast, they wouldn’t have to worry about rain for at least three or four days. Buck drove them to the parking area at the side of the ranch house and they got in the Jeep. But before they went anywhere, he had to remove the soft top at the garage south of the house.

Once that was accomplished, they set out for the Forrester cabin. The second they pulled up in front, Johnny threw open the door. “I’ll get them.”

“You do that.” The less involvement he had with Alex Forrester, the better. After they got back from town, he’d turn them over to Carson for the horseback-riding lesson while he helped with the framing. Ross could take them fishing in the morning. A good rotational plan was called for if he wanted to survive this week with his emotions intact.

He didn’t have to wait long for their guests. The ladies came right out. Correction, Jenny practically flew down the steps, her blond ponytail swaying back and forth. “I’ve never ridden in a Jeep before!”

“It’s cool!” Johnny raced after her. “Can we sit in back, Uncle Buck?”

“Uncle—”

“He’s not really my uncle. Neither is Ross. But Daddy told me I could call them that if I wanted.”

“You must love them a lot.”

“I love them as much as my uncles in Cleveland, but don’t tell my mom I told you that.”

The things Johnny said got to Buck’s heart. More and more, he found himself wanting to be a father. “Ross and I love you, too. Now, make sure your seat belts are fastened.”

“We will,” they said in unison.

Buck stepped down and walked around to help Alex in the front passenger seat. She was wearing a crewneck sweater in a sage-green color with khaki pleated trousers. Although her legs were covered today, the length of them combined with her womanly hips and generous curves made nonsense of his intentions to remain indifferent.

Her fragrance put him in mind of a vale of spring wildflowers, adding to the assault on his senses. Damn. Frank had more than one reason to wish the two of them hadn’t come on this trip. Buck knew he wouldn’t have been able to handle it.

“Thank you,” she said as he shut the door.

He nodded and took his place behind the wheel. “Before we leave, did anyone forget anything? Now is the time to speak up.”

Alex glanced at him with a mysterious smile. “Or forever hold our peace?”

Buck could feel himself falling into those eyes that looked like impossibly dark blue pools. “Something like that,” he murmured.

“Thanks, Buck, for taking us into town,” she said. “You’ve been so wonderful to us and this is such a beautiful day. I can’t believe there was ever a storm last night. It’s getting hot already.”

“It’s always that way here in the mountains.”

“Yep,” Johnny piped up from the back as they drove off. He had big ears. As usual, he was multitasking and could take in every word the grown-ups had to say, while maintaining a conversation with his new friend. “Hey, Jenny? Do you want to go swimming later?”

“Yes. I love swimming.”

Buck smiled to himself. “You mean, after you’ve shown her your pony?”

“Yeah. I think she should ride Mitzi. Have you ever been riding?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s okay, but the horses are so big. Frank’s friend owns horses and he’s taken us a lot of times.”

“Oh. Who’s Frank?”

“Nana’s boyfriend.”

“I didn’t know grandmas had boyfriends.”

Buck burst into laughter. He couldn’t help it. Thankfully, Alex joined him.

Buck heard whispering coming from the backseat. Alex turned her head. “Jenny? It’s not polite to whisper in front of other people.”

“I’m sorry.”

Johnny had always amused Buck, but he couldn’t remember ever being this entertained before. He turned onto the highway leading into the town of Jackson. The place was crowded with every kind of four-wheel-drive vehicle loaded up with kayaks, bikes and rafts. After he made a left down one of the streets, they passed a movie theater.

“Hey—” Johnny cried out. “Can we go see that after we get her a cap gun?”

“Could we, Nana? See The Big Blue Macaw? It’s that show about those birds from Brazil! My teacher said we should go.”

“Sweetheart, we came to a dude ranch. Buck has more exciting things for us to do than watch a movie.”

“Actually I haven’t been to see a movie in a theater in years. It sounds fun.”

“Yippee!” Johnny exclaimed.

“Mandy says it’s really good.”

“Who’s Mandy?”

“One of my friends from school. But we’ve been off track for a week and I haven’t seen her. I have to go back to school after our trip.”

“My school doesn’t start for another month.”

“You’re lucky.”

Alex shot Buck a glance. “Do you think the theater would even be open this time of day?”

He nodded. “They have matinees. You’d be surprised how many guests at the dude ranch take in a show while they’re in town. When you’re on vacation, you should be able to do whatever you want.” For the moment, this was exactly what Buck wanted to do.

One more corner and they came to the Boot Corral. He shut off the engine and they all climbed out. Johnny led the way inside the store. The college-aged girl at the counter broke into a smile when she saw Buck. “Hello again, you guys.”

“Hi,” Johnny greeted her. Buck followed suit.

The brunette was cute and flirted with him every time he came in, but there was no chemistry and she was too young for him. “Today we need a cap gun, a holster and enough ammo to last a week.”

“It’s for Jenny,” Johnny explained.

“I see. Well, let’s get her outfitted. Is there anything else you need while I’m at it?”

“Do you have any cowboy boots?” Johnny asked Jenny.

“No.”

“Then she needs boots and a hat!” Johnny was starting to sound more like Carson every day.

“Could I have a white one?”

“I think there’s one your size.”

“Maybe I’ll get some cowboy boots, too,” Alex spoke up.

Buck had been on the verge of suggesting it.

“Great. Come on and follow me to the other end of the store.”

Before long, they’d bought everything they needed. Buck enjoyed sitting back while he watched Alex try on several different kinds of boots. With those legs...

When all the decisions had been made, he threw in a white hat for her. “Now you and Jenny will be the good guy twins.”

After flashing him a smile that lit her eyes, she walked to the front desk and pulled out her credit card.

“Sorry.” Buck picked it up and handed it back to her. He felt her warmth when their hands brushed in the process. “These purchases are compliments of the ranch. They go with the territory.”

She shook her head. “I don’t feel right about it.”

“Too bad, because that’s the way it is.” He turned to the clerk. “Put it on my bill.”

“You bet.”

“Would it be all right if we leave the bags here? We’ll come back for them a little later.”

“No problem. I’ll leave them behind the counter.”

“Thank you.” Excited for what was to follow, Buck left his cowboy hat with their purchases and walked the four of them out to the Jeep. When he’d flown into Jackson last evening anticipating the Forresters’ arrival, he couldn’t have imagined this happy scene or a woman like Alex. Although Frank was waiting in the background, Buck refused to think about that right now.

Chapter Three

Alex had noticed the way the clerk who’d waited on them only had eyes for Buck. That didn’t surprise her. There were a lot of guys walking around the store and out on the streets, but none of them had captured Alex’s attention, either.

And although he was nice to the attractive girl who’d looked to be in her early twenties, he didn’t give off any signals that he was interested. If Alex had been that clerk, it would have been disappointing not to make any headway with him. A man with his appeal and charisma didn’t come along often.

Alex couldn’t remember the last time she’d found a younger man so attractive. In fact, it frustrated her that he’d been on her mind this much since their arrival in Jackson.

After Christy was born, Alex had lived with her parents and had gotten a job so she could afford day care for her baby. Later on, when Christy started kindergarten, Alex went to college on student loans at night and worked during the day while still living at home.

Once she’d graduated with a degree in finance, she started a new job at a bank near her parents’ house and eventually earned enough money to move into an apartment with Christy. Over those years, she’d dedicated herself to her child and her work. She’d gone out on the occasional date, but getting married hadn’t been her focus.

Her teenage love affair resulting in a child had changed her life and priorities. She’d worked so hard at everything and was so grateful for her parents’ help that her mind hadn’t been on guys. To her chagrin, her teenage daughter fell in love at seventeen, too. Since she and Daniel wanted to get married, Alex gave her permission. It was a good thing because they had a baby right away and Alex helped them all she could so they’d have a stable home. Soon after Jenny came along, Daniel joined the marines.

It was about the same time that Frank lost his wife. While Alex commiserated with him at work, their friendship grew. Then came double tragedy. Alex lived to console her granddaughter and give her the life she deserved. Frank was there to talk to and filled a huge void in her life.

In time, she fell in love with him and was thrilled when he proposed. To have a wonderful, constant man in her life and Jenny’s meant everything. But when she’d broached the idea of marriage with Jenny, it hadn’t gone as she’d hoped.

Her granddaughter’s feelings seemed all mixed up inside. Some days she was angry and threw her Lego bricks all over her room. Other times, Alex found her by the window in her bedroom after school, so lonely and quiet it pierced her heart. Last week, she’d talked constantly about her daddy and cried because he and her mommy were gone.

The invitation to spend an expense-free week at the dude ranch had brought the only light to Jenny's eyes in the past year. When Frank drove them to the airport to come on this trip, Jenny had acted as if he wasn't there. Alex was mortified over her behavior and suspected her granddaughter was glad they were getting away from him for a week. He had to have noticed, but there was nothing to be done about it.

But since their arrival in Jackson last night, Jenny had been acting like a normal girl again. Alex had a hunch Buck's entry into their lives had something to do with Jenny's lighter spirits. The man sure knew how to make everything exciting.

Frank wasn't exciting in the same way to Jenny, because he was older. Of course, it wasn't only that. Frank had a completely different personality. But the aspects Alex loved about him didn't do it for Jenny. He was too set in his ways for her and not spontaneous enough.

Buck, on the other hand, appeared ready to do anything and delighted the kids by getting them hot dogs and popcorn to eat during the movie. Alex felt like a kid herself as they entered the crowded theater with their food. Johnny spotted four seats together three-fourths of the way back and urged Jenny to follow him. Alex and Buck joined them. The film had a clever story and some catchy music. But as much as Alex enjoyed it, she was far too aware of the man seated on her left to be able to concentrate fully.

He smelled good and looked fantastic. Buck Summerhayes was a man in his prime who was plagued by a cough he'd inherited from the war. Like her son-in-law, Daniel, he'd done something exceptional with his life by fighting for his country. He and his friends were still doing something exceptional in their own way by making this trip possible for her and Jenny.

Her eyes smarted at the dedication of these men who had to keep oxygen on hand, yet didn't let it bother them. Johnny obviously admired Buck who could be fun and kind, yet firm when necessary. Jenny had liked him right off. That never happened with strangers.

Alex couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this carefree. When she got home, she would have to write to Daniel's commanding officer and thank him for urging her to bring Jenny on this trip.

"Are you all right?" Buck whispered.

Besides everything else, he was sensitive, too. "Yes," she whispered back. "I was just thinking how glad I am we came. Already you've made my granddaughter so happy."

"That's Johnny's doing."

"I think she feels an affinity with him because they've both lost their fathers, but he's had help from you and your friends. You're all true heroes."

After a long silence, he asked, "What about you? How are you holding up? I've never been a parent, but I know it had to be devastating for you to lose your daughter."

Her throat swelled. "I wouldn't have made it if I didn't have Jenny to raise. She gives me a reason to get up every morning."

"For what it's worth, your devotion to her is heroic. Carson's grandfather raised him after his parents died. I see how he turned out and can only marvel over the older man's ability to be there for Carson in every way. He left this ranch to him. It's now Carson's goal to make the ranch successful and pay back the man who was a hero, just like you."

Tears escaped her closed lids. She wiped them away. "Don't praise me. My work has barely begun."

"That's what I'm talking about." His deep tone flowed through her. "You'll be there for her all your life. After what you've had to endure, I admire you more than you know."

"Thank you."

Deeply touched, she remained silent for the rest of the film. When it was over, they left and drove to the Boot Corral for their packages. On the way back to the ranch, Jenny got out her new gun. Johnny showed her how to fill the cartridge with a roll of caps. Pretty soon they were both firing their weapons at imaginary bad guys.

The noise didn't seem to bother Buck. Frank would have asked them to stop until they got home. He was so different from Buck, who seemed to say and do all the right things around Jenny. But it wasn't fair to compare them. Frank was probably twenty years Buck's senior.

He drove them to her cabin, and then looked over his shoulder at the kids. "What do you want to do now?"

"Play cowboys!" Jenny spoke up. She and Johnny scrambled out of the back and ran around the side of the cabin, whooping it up.

Buck's lips twitched, mesmerizing Alex. "I thought he wanted to go riding, but those cap guns are a strong draw."

"Jenny's never had one. The novelty will wear off, but I'm just glad she's having a great time with Johnny. Since I know your work is never done here on the ranch, why don't you go and do what needs doing. I'll watch both of them and walk Johnny back to the ranch house later."

From beneath the rim of his Stetson, he gazed at her through shuttered eyes. Jenny had been correct about their color. In the sunlight they were the shade of new spring grass. "You're right about the never-ending work, but my main responsibility is to take care of you this week. Behind the scenes, we've nicknamed this place the Daddy Dude Ranch for obvious reasons."

And they did the daddy part better than she could have imagined. "Then I'll relieve you of that awesome responsibility for a little while, because you deserve some rest."

"Well, thank you, ma'am," he drawled. His eyes seemed to focus on her mouth. "In that case, why don't I come inside with you? While you put the things you bought away, I'll make us some instant coffee. I could do with a cup."

Alex's heart thumped. This was something she knew she should avoid, but after all he'd done for them, she didn't dare offend him. "Well...I won't say no to that."

As they went inside with her packages, the feeling grew stronger that she'd just been on a date with him, and now they were coming home to spend the rest of the evening together. She had to remember this was the middle of the afternoon and it wasn't a date!

For one thing, he was probably ten years younger than she was, despite his maturity. For another, in the absence of Jenny's father, it was Buck's job to make certain this turned into a real vacation for her granddaughter, nothing more. She wished to heaven she could see it that way, but he'd managed to get under her skin. The only way to get him out was to leave Wyoming, but she and Jenny had only just arrived.

On her way into the bedroom with their packages, her cell phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID. It was Frank calling her back. She'd tried to reach him earlier that morning, but he'd been in a meeting. Guilt pricked her when she thought about Buck being in the next room. The fact that she felt any guilt told her she was in trouble.

"If you'll excuse me, I need to answer my phone."

"Take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere."

She shivered, knowing it was true. After shutting the door, she sank down on the side of her twin bed to talk. "Frank?"

"Finally! I waited for your call this morning, but when it didn't come, I had a business conference to attend. How are you?"

"Good." Better than good, but he wouldn't like hearing her say that, since he hadn't wanted her to leave Sacramento. He was afraid it would open up old wounds for her and Jenny by being around the marines who'd invited them. To her surprise, it was doing the exact opposite. But after meeting Buck, she felt...vulnerable. She could never remember feeling that way before.

"I miss you more than I can say, Alexis." He'd always called her that at the bank and it had stuck.

When she thought about it, she hadn't had time to miss him and that made her feel guiltier. "I miss you too. Will you be seeing Cindy and the kids soon?"

"I'm going over there for dinner tonight."

“I’m glad.”

“Where are you right now?”

“At the cabin. We’ve just come home from town with cowboy boots and a cap gun.”

“Cap gun?”

“Yes. There’s a boy here, Jenny’s age, who has one. They’re outside, running around with them. In a few minutes we’re going to the barn to see his pony. Frank—I-I’m afraid I can’t talk any longer,” she stammered, aware Buck was waiting for her. She couldn’t think with him inside her cabin. “Call me tonight when you’re back from Cindy’s and we’ll talk.”

“I should be home by ten at the latest.”

“Talk to you then.”

“Alexis?”

“Yes?”

“I love you. Let’s hope this trip does Jenny a world of good, because we have plans to make when you get back.”

“We’ll talk about that tonight. Love you, too.” She hung up and hurried back into the living room.

Buck was standing on the front porch with a coffee mug, obviously keeping an eye on the kids. He’d made coffee for her. She pulled it out of the microwave and joined him. “Sorry. That was a phone call I had to take. Thanks for the coffee.” She took a sip.

He eyed her over his mug. “You’re welcome. Everything okay?”

She took a steadying breath. She wasn’t okay, not really. Frank would be horribly hurt and upset by what she had to tell him. She was upset, too. “Yes.”

He turned toward the main ranch house. “They’ve gone to see if they can spot Moppy. If they’re not back in a few minutes, I’ll go get them.”

“I suspect they ran out of caps.”

“You’re right.” He chuckled. “But they decided to take a detour before they loaded up again so they wouldn’t scare the squirrel.”

“Johnny seems to be a busy bee. I think Jenny has met her match.”

“Soul mates at seven,” he mused aloud. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“Did you ever meet yours?” The question flew out of her mouth before she could prevent it. She shouldn’t have asked him anything that personal, but couldn’t seem to help herself.

“I thought I had in high school. But when I went away to college, she didn’t wait for me.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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