

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# SUSAN MALLERY

*kiss me*



A FOOL'S GOLD ROMANCE

BRAND-NEW STORY

Susan Mallery

**Kiss Me**

«HarperCollins»

## **Mallery S.**

Kiss Me / S. Mallery — «HarperCollins»,

New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery creates the small-town destination for romance in charming Fool's Gold, California—where a loner cowboy finds the one woman who can capture his heart. After Phoebe Kitzke's kind heart gets her suspended from her job in LA, she swears off doing favors—until her best friend begs for help on the family ranch in Fool's Gold. Unfortunately, sexy cowboy Zane Nicholson isn't exactly thrilled by the city girl's arrival. Thanks to his brother's latest scheme, Zane has been roped into taking tourists on a cattle drive. What Phoebe knows about ranching wouldn't fill his hat, but her laughter is so captivating that even his animals fall for her. One slip of his legendary control leads to a passionate kiss that convinces him she's exactly the kind of woman a single-minded loner needs to avoid. In his arms, Phoebe discovers she's a country girl at heart. Yet no matter how much the small town feels like home, she can't stay unless Zane loves her, too...but is this cowboy interested in forever?

New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery creates the small-town destination for romance in charming Fool's Gold, California—where a loner cowboy finds the one woman who can capture his heart

After Phoebe Kitzke's kind heart gets her suspended from her job in LA, she swears off doing favors—until her best friend begs for help on the family ranch in Fool's Gold. Unfortunately, sexy cowboy Zane Nicholson isn't exactly thrilled by the city girl's arrival.

Thanks to his brother's latest scheme, Zane has been roped into taking tourists on a cattle drive. What Phoebe knows about ranching wouldn't fill his hat, but her laughter is so captivating that even his animals fall for her. One slip of his legendary control leads to a passionate kiss that convinces him she's exactly the kind of woman a single-minded loner needs to avoid.

In his arms, Phoebe discovers she's a country girl at heart. Yet no matter how much the small town feels like home, she can't stay unless Zane loves her, too...but is this cowboy interested in forever?

[Praise for New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery](#)

“Susan Mallery is one of my favorites.”

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

“The wildly popular and prolific Mallery can always be counted on to tell an engaging story of modern romance.”

—Booklist

“This book is a dynamite read filled with humor, compassion and sexy sizzle.”

—RT Book Reviews on Three Little Words, Top Pick!

“Mallery has again created an engrossing tale of emotional growth and the healing power of friendship as these three ‘sisters’ meet life's challenges.”

—Library Journal on Three Sisters

“Both smile and tear inducing. Mallery is one of a kind.”

—RT Book Reviews on Two of a Kind, Top Pick!

“Mallery delivers another engaging romance in magical Fool's Gold.”

—Kirkus Reviews on Just One Kiss

“Mallery infuses her story with eccentricity, gentle humor, and small-town shenanigans, and readers...will enjoy the connection between Heidi and Rafe.”

—Publishers Weekly on Summer Days

“Romance novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling.”

—Booklist

Kiss Me

Susan Mallery



**MILLS  
BOON** [www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

This book is dedicated by one of my favorite readers:

To my girlfriends—you add the flavor to my life and laughter to my days. Here's to friends sharing fun, flowers and fabulous food. They say warm friendships are a ticket to a longer life...maybe we'll all push 100!!!

Love,

Nancy

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Praise](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

ZANE NICHOLSON BELIEVED in listening to his gut. At nine fifty-five that morning, it was telling him that today wasn't going to be a good day.

He glanced out the window at the rolling hills that made up the Nicholson Ranch and wondered if being a farmer would have been easier. Crops didn't break through fences in the night and wander away. Crops didn't try to be born breech. He could be growing corn. Or wheat. Wheat was patriotic. All those amber waves.

He turned his attention back to his paperwork and shook his head. Who was he kidding? He was a fifth generation rancher. The closest he would come to farming was the vegetable garden the ranch cook grew out behind the bunkhouse.

"Hey, boss."

Zane watched his foreman step into his office. Frank Adelman took off his worn cowboy hat, slapped it against his left thigh, then eased into the hard, plastic chair in front of the desk.

A visit from Frank before noon wasn't going to bring good news.

"What?" Zane asked, more resigned than annoyed.

Nicholson Ranch had been annexed earlier this year by the city of Fool's Gold, California, meaning that it was now inside the city's jurisdiction, a decision which the mayor had sworn would be good for him. She said everyone out this way would benefit from more city services, but so far, it had only meant an increase in paperwork. He didn't see the win, though his brother was happy about the faster internet speeds that came from the city laying cable out this way.

“There’s a busted pipe in the bunkhouse,” Frank said. “Under the kitchen sink. All the boys are out with the herd. I turned the water off, but we’re going to have to see to it today. You want me to pull someone in or call for a plumber?”

Zane dropped his pen on the desk and rubbed his temples. What he wanted was a little cooperation from fate. A couple of weeks without a crisis. Apparently that was too much to ask.

He weighed his options. Frank couldn’t take care of the busted pipe because they were expecting buyers in an hour or so, and Frank was going to take them around to see the kids. Zane had a meeting with some research scientists from Cal U, Fool’s Gold, that afternoon, which meant *he* couldn’t take the buyers around. A plumber from Fool’s Gold would be easiest, but he might not be able to get someone out today.

“Call in a couple of the boys,” he said at last, then shook his head. “It’s Monday, right? It always hits the fan on Monday.”

Frank grunted his agreement, then rose. The phone rang before he’d even walked to the door.

So much for getting his paperwork finished on time, Zane thought as he reached for the receiver.

“Nicholson Ranch,” he said. “This is Zane.”

“Hi,” a woman said, her voice low and friendly. “I’m calling to talk to someone about facilities. Can you help me with that?”

Zane blinked at the question. “Facilities? You mean horse boarding? We don’t do that here, ma’am. You could check with old Reilly Konopka. Last I heard he was taking in boarders. Or Castle Ranch in town. Ask for Rafe.”

The woman laughed. “No. Not facilities for my horse. I meant for my husband and myself. We’re coming up for the cattle drive this weekend, and I was wondering if there were any spa facilities. We’ve been under a lot of stress lately. I was thinking that a couple’s massage might be a nice start to our vacation. Maybe deep tissue. Or those heated rocks. Aren’t they all the rage right now?”

Massage? Vacation? Cattle drive?

“Ma’am, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Zane said, his temper rising steadily as a knot formed in his gut. His gut feeling turned downright ugly.

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed. “The website didn’t say anything about a spa, but I was hoping. Can you recommend a hotel with a spa in Fool’s Gold? We’ll come a day early. I do want to be rested before we arrive for our cattle drive on Saturday.”

“Ma’am, could you please tell me about this cattle drive you’re expecting?”

“Excuse me? Aren’t you an employee of the ranch?”

He was supposed to own it. What was going on? “I’m, ah, filling in,” he lied.

“Oh. All right. My husband and I are going on a cattle drive.”

She chatted away, giving details, including the website where she’d first found her vacation. While she continued to talk, Zane turned to his computer and typed in the web address. When the site popped up, his jaw dropped. He barely remembered to say goodbye before hanging up the phone.

In less than two minutes he’d explored the site, which detailed all the delights of a Northern California cattle-drive vacation. On Zane’s ranch. There was only one person who would dare a trick like that—his brother.

Rage bubbled and boiled into something Zane couldn’t begin to name. It filled him until he knew he was going to explode.

Chase had screwed up before, countless times, but compared to this new stunt, all that had been kids’ stuff. What had he been thinking?

Zane stood and headed for the door, then stopped himself. He wanted to hit something, throw something, break something. If he went to Chase right now, he would say and do a lot of things they would both regret. He knew the kid saw him as a cross between the devil incarnate and the worst guardian since Scrooge. He also knew Chase was nearly an adult, and if the teen didn’t get his shit together, he was going to spend his life screwing up and living with regrets.

Regrets. The single word was enough to calm Zane's temper. He'd lived with them himself, since he was Chase's age. They had a way of eating at a man's insides. Of making him want to outrun the wind, if only he could leave the past behind. But the world wasn't that tidy. Once done, a thing couldn't be undone. He didn't want that for his brother.

Ever since Chase had been a toddler, following him around the ranch, mimicking his every move, Zane had loved him so much, it was painful at times. He had vowed back then to watch out for the kid, to protect him—even from himself.

So instead of going gunning for Chase, he returned to his desk to consider the best course of action. Once and for all he was determined to teach his brother about responsibility so he could become the kind of man who respected himself. The kind of man who didn't have to live with the ghost of blame.

\* \* \*

"I'VE DECIDED NOT to put you in prison, Ms. Kitzke," Judge Haverston said, looking stern as she peered over her half-glasses. "I believe you had the best of intentions." She paused. "You know what they say about the road to hell."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"There will be no punitive damages. The earnest money will be refunded." She glanced at the paperwork on her wide desk, then gave her gavel a light tap. "I believe we are adjourned."

Phoebe Kitzke remained standing as everyone else in the small Los Angeles courtroom was told to rise. Judge Haverston swept through the doorway leading to her chambers, or whatever it was that judges had. The legal secret place, she thought, looking for humor but unable to feel anything except lingering terror. Hopefully relief would soon follow.

Not going to prison was a good thing, she reminded herself. She'd seen plenty of teenage prison movies when she'd stayed up late watching cable while babysitting back in high school. She knew what sorts of things could happen. Far better to stay on the right side of the law.

Phoebe shook hands with the company attorney and thanked him for his help, then turned to find her boss, April Keller, waiting for her. April was taller than Phoebe—who wasn't?—and the kind of sun-streaked blonde Southern California was famous for. Phoebe had always felt a bit out of place in LA, with her short, curvy physique, and dark hair and eyes.

"Are you okay?" April asked.

Phoebe shrugged. "I'm happy about avoiding prison. I don't have the background to be successful there. As for the rest of it, I'm still pretty numb."

April sighed. "I'm sorry," she said, sounding both miserable and relieved. "For everything. You really saved me."

Phoebe didn't want to go there. If she thought too much about what had happened, she would get angry and say things that would damage an important relationship.

"What about my job?" she asked instead. "Did I save that, too?"

April pressed her lips together and avoided her gaze.

"Great," Phoebe said and pushed past her, heading for the exit. "Let me guess. I've been fired."

"Suspended."

April followed her into the hallway. People milled around them, all going about their legal business. Phoebe hoped the innocent ones would have better luck than she did. She stopped by a battered bulletin board and looked at her boss.

"For how long?" she asked.

"A month." April touched her arm. "Look, I'm going to make this up to you, I swear. I'll pay your salary out of my own pocket."

Phoebe sucked in a breath. "I was suspended without pay?"

April nodded.

Perfect. Just perfect. Phoebe stepped back and squared her shoulders. “I guess I’ll see you in a month,” she said before heading for the door.

April hurried after her. “Phoebe, wait. I know you’re furious with me. You have every right to be angry.”

Phoebe stopped. “Actually, the person I’m angry with is myself.”

Tears filled April’s eyes. “If you hadn’t helped me, I don’t know what would have happened.”

“I know. I’m glad you’re okay.” She made a show of glancing at her watch. “Look, I have to go.”

“Okay, but call me in a couple of days, okay? You can yell at me for as long as you want. I deserve it.”

Phoebe nodded, then walked toward the elevator for the underground parking. She tried to tell herself that in the larger picture, she’d done a good deed. Cosmically, she’d just improved her chances of fame and glory in her next life by helping out someone in need. If there was a next life. If there wasn’t, she’d just been suspended—without pay—from a job she loved, for something that shouldn’t have been her fault, but was.

So far it wasn’t the best Monday she’d ever had.

“Phoebe?”

The voice came from behind her, but she recognized it. Recognized it and knew her Monday was about to get worse. She sucked in a breath and turned to find Jeff Edwards standing in the grubby hallway. The same Jeff she’d once loved, promised to marry and had almost moved in with...right up until she’d caught him in bed with an eighteen-year-old intern she was training as part of a jobs program for kids aging out of foster care.

Tall, good-looking, successful Jeff Edwards who had dared to demand all his DVDs back after she’d ended the relationship. Jeff Edwards of the California Bureau of Real Estate.

“You really screwed up,” he said, holding out an official-looking envelope. “The board is considering revoking your license.”

She blinked at him, unable to believe this was really happening. It was like being involved in a car accident, when everything moved in slow motion. While there was no time to stop the course of events that would change her life forever, there was also no way to avoid the crash.

In a perfect world, she would be able to think of some witty, biting comment to put him in his place. But as her world was spinning in much the same direction as her day, she plucked the envelope from his hands without saying a word. In her first stroke of luck that morning, the elevator doors chose that moment to open, and she stepped inside with as much silent dignity as she could muster. Her only minor victory was the look of shock on Jeff’s face as the door gently closed, leaving him standing alone and talking to himself.

\* \* \*

CHASE TYPED RAPIDLY on his keyboard, his fingers moving in time with the pounding beat of the song playing in his earbuds. On his screen, a small frame in the corner displayed a montage of images flickering on and off, also in perfect synchronization with the music. He ignored them for the most part—except for the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit pictures he’d downloaded the previous week. Those very fine ladies got his full attention. When his program started flashing pictures of rock bands, cars and twisted space aliens, he moved his gaze back to the chat box in the center of his screen, and the message waiting there.

Robotic cat failed to attack mice, although it did fall on one.

Chase read the sentence twice, swore, then pulled out a worn notebook and began flipping through the pages.

Did it show any interest at all? he typed. Can you confirm sensors are working?

Because in the last test, the sensors had been working fine. At least they’d been registering. But did the robot understand what it was seeing? That was where he and Peter stumbled. Maybe a

robot cat was too ambitious, he thought for the thousandth time. Maybe they should have started with the mouse instead. Maybe—

The pounding in his earbuds suddenly went silent. Chase glanced up and saw Zane standing next to his desk, the jack connecting the earbuds to the computer dangling from his hands.

Instantly he hit three keys in rapid succession, activating the macro that sent a message to Peter telling him, due to adult interference, communication would have to cease for now. All his friends had similar emergency escape messages. Some of them were pretty funny. But looking at Zane's angry face and the fury blazing in his eyes didn't make Chase feel much like laughing.

He tried to remember if he'd messed up recently. He'd accidentally broken a couple of plates while cleaning the kitchen last night, but Zane had already yelled at him for that. Plus the level of anger radiating from him wasn't about two broken plates. Which meant Chase had messed up somewhere else. Somewhere big. But it wasn't noon. Except for breakfast, he hadn't even left his room.

Unless Zane had found out about...

Zane didn't say anything. Instead he moved closer to the desk, then leaned over and typed in an internet address. By the time he punched in the fourth letter, Chase knew he was totally and completely screwed.

He watched the site load in a matter of seconds. A panoramic picture of the town of Fool's Gold nestled into the Sierra Nevada filled the screen. Text scrolled at the bottom. *Come to the Northern California wilderness and experience a vacation like no other.*

The picture faded, replaced by one of people riding on horseback. It was a great photo, he thought, remembering how he'd copied it from another site.

"Start talking," Zane growled as he straightened and fixed Chase with his sternest expression.

When Chase had been little, he'd called it the death-ray look. It used to terrify him. But he'd been a kid then and still unclear on how things worked. Back then Zane had been his big brother and the best part of his world. He'd been too young to know that while he would always think of Zane as his brother, his family, Zane would only think of him as a constant screwup who always got in the way.

"Well?"

Chase unwound himself from his chair and crossed to the bed. While the death-ray look no longer sent him running, he liked a little distance between himself and Zane.

"It's no big deal," Chase bluffed. "Peter Moreno and I designed a website for our computer science class. Mr. Hendrix gave us an A. He said someday we're gonna be better at computers than he is."

Zane pulled out the chair Chase had vacated and sank into it. After rubbing his eyes, he slowly shook his head.

"Yeah. You got an A in computer science and physics and math and every other subject that interests you. We'll ignore the C in English and the D in history."

Chase threw himself back on the bed. Jeez, were they going to go through all that again? No one at MIT was going to care if he didn't do well in history. It wasn't that kind of college. Of course if Zane had his way, Chase would never get to MIT. Instead he'd spend his life shoveling cow shit and feeding goats.

"I got a phone call about a half hour ago," Zane said.

His carefully controlled voice made Chase sit up slowly. Even scarier than the death-ray look was the quiet voice. It meant that Zane was doing the best he could to hold on to his temper before it exploded and took out everyone from here to Sacramento.

"A woman wanted to know if she could get a massage before going on her cattle drive."

"Oh. That."

"Yes, that. Why don't you tell me about it?"

Chase swallowed as he remembered what he and Peter had done. It had been a joke that had gotten out of hand. He glanced at Zane and saw a muscle twitch in his jaw. Not exactly a good sign.

“Don’t panic,” he said quickly. “I’ve got everything under control.”

“Tell me the plan, Chase.”

Zane looked like a man holding on to his temper with both hands. Chase wasn’t sure how long his brother’s grip would last. He started talking as fast as he could.

“Like I said, it was our school project. We had to design a website, then put it on the internet.”

“Through the *school*,” Zane said, his teeth clenched. “But you put yours on a host so anyone could access it.”

“Um, that was an accident. Reese Hendrix did it as a joke.”

Zane’s hands curled into fists. “A joke? You advertised a cattle drive. You took reservations. You accepted money.”

“Just for a little while,” Chase protested. “Look, I know what I’m doing.”

His brother stood and crossed to the window. “So people are arriving on Saturday expecting a six-day cattle drive? Was that the plan?”

“No. Don’t worry, I’ve got that taken care of. It was a mistake. When the money started arriving, Peter and I didn’t know what to do.” Okay, later he’d figured out that sending it back with a letter explaining the mix-up would have been really smart, but it hadn’t occurred to him at the time.

“Peter and I are working on our robot, and we needed parts. Peter put in his share, but you wouldn’t loan me any money or pay for anything.”

“You used strangers’ money for your project?” Zane bellowed, turning back to face him. “That’s stealing. The whole website is fraud, and I’m sure we can throw in theft for good measure.”

Chase sprang to his feet. “I didn’t steal. I’d never steal or do those other things.”

“Then where’s the money?”

“Right here.” Chase moved to his computer and started typing quickly. “Peter and I did some day-trading. We figured we’d just borrow their money for a while. After we made a bundle off the deposits, we’d return them and keep the profits. Which was a great idea until the fourth day when we lost nearly everything.”

Zane made a sound low in his throat. Chase kept typing, logging on to his brokerage account.

“I know what you’re thinking. That we were screwed, right? But then we overheard this tourist at the Fourth of July Festival in Fool’s Gold talking about a tech company that was going to announce a new kind of motherboard, and their stock would go through the roof. So we bought as much as we could with what we had left. The announcement is going to be at five today. We’ll sell the stock and send back the deposits. I figured we’d tell everyone the ranch burned down or something so they won’t show up.”

He risked a glance at his brother. “So I’ve got it covered. I’ve even written up the letter telling everyone not to come and that we’ll be sending their deposits back overnight mail. Pretty good, huh?”

Zane’s expression remained unreadable. “You stole their money, lost it day-trading, plan to get it back through insider trading and you’re canceling their vacation with less than a week’s notice. You think that’s *pretty good*?”

His voice rose with each word. Chase had the feeling he was trying to control himself, only he wasn’t doing a really great job.

“These people are expecting a vacation. They’ve taken time off work, bought tickets. You want me to give you an idea of how much they could sue you for?”

“Not really,” he muttered.

At that moment his brokerage account popped up. He scrolled down to the value and nearly passed out when he saw it was less than two dollars.

“No!” he yelled. He frantically clicked on the stock trading code of the company to check on recent news articles. A big headline flashed onto his computer screen.

Company President Arrested for Stealing Proprietary Information from Rivals.

He felt more than heard his brother approach. Zane touched the screen. “There seems to be a problem with your plan.”

Chase didn’t know what to say. This was bad. Really bad. Probably the worst thing he’d ever done. He felt nauseous. He couldn’t think. People were going to be arriving for a cattle drive. He didn’t have the money to pay them back, and if Zane didn’t bail him out, he was probably going to be arrested. Or worse.

“I really blew it,” he said more to himself than his brother.

“Looks that way.”

Heat flared on Chase’s cheeks. He stared at the floor, studying the scarred wood beneath his feet and the scuffs on his worn cowboy boots.

“Sorry.”

“Sorry?” Zane swore loudly. “You’ve pulled some pretty boneheaded stunts in the past, but you’ve never gone this far before. I expected better.” He clenched his hands, as if trying to keep from punching something...or someone. “I always expect better of you. After all this time, you’d think I’d learn.”

No punishment, not even a good beating, could ever hurt worse than those words. They made Chase feel small and afraid. His throat tightened, as did his chest. For the first time in years, he thought he might actually cry.

“Now what?” Chase asked.

Zane walked to the door. “Good question. You have a backup plan?”

Chase shook his head. “I g-guess—” His voice cracked, and he had to clear his throat before continuing. “I guess I need to borrow the money so I can pay those people back.”

Zane didn’t say anything for a long time. When he finally spoke, Chase knew it was going to be bad.

“A loan would be too simple,” Zane said. “I’m going to call Raoul and Pia to tell them what you and Peter did. Then I’m going to try to figure out what to do with you. This isn’t going to be an easy punishment. I’m going to teach you a lesson you’ll never forget.”

He walked out of the room without saying another word. Chase watched him go. For the first time in his life, he wondered if Zane was going to send him away. Chase tried to tell himself it wouldn’t be so bad. He hated the ranch. He wanted to go away, to study computers and lasers and all kinds of cool stuff. Not cattle breeding.

But leaving on his own terms and being kicked out by his only living blood relative were two very different things. He sank back on the bed, feeling alone and scared and a whole lot younger than seventeen.

## CHAPTER TWO

TWO HOURS AFTER her court hearing, Phoebe had cleared out her desk, left her pending files on April’s desk, purchased a large quantity of chocolate and candy from the See’s store and driven to the tall Century City high-rise where her best friend, Maya Farlow, was a producer for a TV entertainment news program.

She smiled at the assistant Maya shared with two other producers, sitting at a desk in the wide hallway. Phoebe tapped lightly on the paneled door, then stepped into a tiny office with a floor-to-ceiling window.

Maya was on the phone, but she motioned for Phoebe to take a seat in front of her desk. Instead Phoebe crossed to the window first and stared out at the north-facing view. To the west lay the Pacific Ocean, to the east, the barely visible high-rises of downtown Los Angeles. And somewhere north was the San Fernando Valley—a suburban mecca everyone loved to mock but that Phoebe actually enjoyed visiting from time to time. The June gloom had burned off, leaving behind brilliant blue skies only possible in Southern California. New York might be the frenetic city that never slept, but LA was cutting-edge cool with a dash of sass.

“Zane,” Maya said, her voice tight, “he’s young. He did something stupid, but—”

Zane. Which meant Maya was talking to her stepbrother. From what Phoebe could tell, the two had never had an easy relationship.

“When does it start?” Maya scribbled something on a sticky pad on the corner of her desk. “Fine. I’ll be there. No, I’m coming. I can’t get out of here today, but I’ll be there. Just go easy—”

She stopped talking as Zane apparently had hung up on her. She made a face at her phone.

“A room with a view,” Phoebe said, taking the seat across from her friend’s. “I haven’t seen your new digs since you moved. Congrats.”

Maya leaned back in her chair and grinned. “Thanks, but I’m hoping I won’t be here for long. There’s a job coming up at a network. On camera and talking about real news, not these Hollywood fluff pieces. If I have to do one more story about an actress’s new hairstyle...” Her smile faded as she studied Phoebe. “Tell me what happened in court. I didn’t get a frantic phone call, so I assume you’re okay. I still have access to cash if you’re going to need bail money.”

Phoebe knew her friend wasn’t kidding about the cash. Maya would be there for her, no matter what.

“No jail time, no punitive damages.” She sighed softly. “The earnest money is to be returned. I’m suspended for a month, without pay, although April says she’s going to pay me herself.”

“She should.” Maya swore. “Let me guess. April just watched the whole thing and didn’t utter a word to the judge.”

Phoebe nodded. “I’m such an idiot. I actually thought she would say something.”

“You mean like the truth?”

“That would have been nice.”

“How upset are you?”

Phoebe smiled ruefully. “There’s a half-pound box of butterscotch squares from See’s in my car. I’m also planning to stop by the grocery store on my way home and buy a bottle of wine.”

“Liquor and sugar. That’s pretty bad.”

“It’s as close as I’ll come to a life of crime.” Phoebe rested her elbows on her knees and covered her face with her hands. “I know better. That’s what kills me about this. What is it with my personality that says I have to earn my place in the world? How many times do I have to be burned before I’ll learn to stop helping people? Every time I do, it gets me in trouble.” She thought about her unexpected meeting with Jeff outside the courtroom.

“Oh, and the Bureau of Real Estate is considering revoking my license. Jeff stopped by to give me the information himself.”

“Did you kick him in the balls?”

“I didn’t think about it in time. Bummer.” She looked at Maya. “Why am I such a sucker?”

“You’re a good person who likes to help people. So what are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. I have a month off. If the board suspends my license...”

She didn’t know what would happen then, nor did she want to think about it. After college she hadn’t had a clue as to what she wanted to do with her life. Then she’d stumbled into real estate, and for the first time ever, she felt that she’d finally found a place where she belonged. She loved showing houses and getting people good financing and watching their faces light up the day they moved in to their new home. It was her whole life.

“April’s a bitch,” Maya said.

Phoebe sighed. “She’s a single mother with three kids, one of whom is chronically sick.”

“You’re making excuses.”

“I’m telling the truth. She’s right. If she’d taken any more time off to stay home with Beth, she could have been fired. So she asked me to fill out the paperwork for the Bauers. My mistake was in listening to her. I knew the paperwork was wrong.”

Phoebe had fought with her boss, and a frustrated April had finally yelled at her to just do what she was told and file the stupid things. Which Phoebe had done, even though she'd known better. But through a series of unfortunate events, what should have just been a mistake had ended up starting a lawsuit and a subsequent criminal investigation—the consequences of which had landed her in court. Rather than tell the truth, April had let her take the fall, explaining that Phoebe could afford to be a screwup. If April got fired, there were three kids on the line. Phoebe hadn't come up with an argument to refute that one.

“I didn't think the real estate board got involved in paperwork mix-ups,” Maya said.

Phoebe thought about the letter in her purse. The one she'd read while consuming four pieces of almond truffle and a double latte from Starbucks.

“They don't. However the Bauers were April's clients, and I did the paperwork. They're accusing me of taking the credit and money for her sale.”

Maya's green eyes widened with sympathy. “Which you didn't do.”

“But who's going to believe me?”

“April knows the truth.”

“April won't risk telling it.”

“So what happens now? You could haul her into court. I could do an exposé.”

“Thanks, but I'm looking for a different sort of option.” Although what it was, Phoebe couldn't say. “I guess I have a month to find myself a new job.” Depending on what happened with her license, maybe a new career. “I love selling real estate. I don't want to stop doing that.”

Maya shook her head. “No, what you love is rescuing people. You're the only Beverly Hills agent I know who specializes in starter homes for the financially challenged. You could be making truckloads of money with movie stars and Hollywood execs, but instead you work with newlyweds and single moms on a budget that wouldn't support a rodent family.”

Phoebe thought about protesting, but she knew her friend was right.

“I know what it's like to be desperate for a place to belong,” she said. She'd lived with the feeling most of her life. One day, she promised herself. One day she would find it, and then she would never let it go.

“Oh, wait.” Phoebe brightened. “I do have one movie-star client, but Jonny Blaze doesn't want to buy a house here in LA. He's looking for a vacation paradise home complete with room for a helicopter pad.”

“Could you at least sleep with him and take your mind off things?”

For the first time that day, Phoebe laughed. “I wish, but the man actually ruffled my hair and told me I looked like his kid sister.”

“That's a drag.”

“Tell me about it.” Phoebe rose. “I have chocolate calling my name, and you have the rich and famous to stalk. I'm going to get out of your way.”

“No way.” Maya rose, came around her desk and gave Phoebe a hug. “I'm not leaving you alone. Let's go out for Mexican.”

“Are you sure you have time?”

“For you? Always.”

\* \* \*

MAYA HAD SAID she needed to wrap up a few things at work, so Phoebe deliberately took the slowest route to their favorite Mexican restaurant. She hated waiting alone in a bar. Instead she took a seat in the foyer and watched the couples and families stream into the popular eatery. Every now and then a single man arrived on his own. She was careful to look away when that happened. The last guy she'd met in a restaurant bar had not only tried to borrow five thousand dollars from her on their second date, but had lied about being married. She was still stinging from the threat of serving jail time and worried about her real estate license—the last thing she needed was a lousy relationship.

Although a good one wouldn't be so bad, she thought wistfully. She wasn't looking for perfect—just a nice guy who would love her, who wanted kids and a regular life filled with things like family car-trip vacations and PTA meetings. A family of her own. Unfortunately she didn't seem to be skilled at meeting normal, stable men. She seemed to attract losers like Jeff the Unfaithful, or married men who wanted money. Maybe instead of looking for a man who obviously didn't exist in her universe, she should think about getting a dog.

Before she could consider breeds or sizes, the front door opened, and Maya breezed in. She was both stylish and elegant in a black suit that skimmed her curves and highlighted her blond hair. Phoebe had been so caught up in her own problems earlier that she hadn't noticed the outfit.

"New?" she asked as she stood and smiled. "It's fabulous."

Maya grinned, then twirled quickly so her suit could be viewed from the back. "It wasn't even on sale, but I couldn't help myself. I love it. This is the suit I bought for my interview with the network, and I've got a green number that matches my eyes for the on-camera audition."

"You'll totally rock the interview," Phoebe said loyally. "And look amazing doing it."

"You're so sweet. Thank you."

Phoebe didn't envy her friend her gorgeous wardrobe. Phoebe shopped at the outlet mall or the Macy's sale rack. With the exception of action-movie stars like Jonny Blaze, her clients didn't want to think their hard-earned money was going to support a designer wardrobe, and she was okay with that.

"I'm starving," Maya said. "And you need a margarita."

They followed the hostess through a maze of wooden tables laden with drinks, chips and oversize plates of fajitas, enchiladas and tacos. The smell of sizzling beef and chicken made Phoebe's mouth water.

The waiter appeared, and they ordered their margaritas and, without looking at the menu, the number three dinner. The busboy was on his heels, leaving chips and salsa.

Phoebe eyed the chips, mentally calculating calories. Not that it was going to matter. By her second margarita, she would throw her eating plan out the window and chow down on everything in sight. In the morning she would try to StairMaster off the calories—with minimal success—and skip lunch. She had been battling the same ten pounds for the past three years. So far, the pounds were winning.

"I have an announcement." Phoebe sipped her drink. "I've realized that I get into trouble every time I help someone. I don't know why, but it happens. So as of now, I'm never helping anyone again. Ever. No matter what."

Maya's green eyes widened. "Wow. That's impressive. I don't believe it for a second, but it's impressive."

Phoebe laughed. "I'm not sure I believe it, either. But I'm going to try."

"Would you mind putting that on hold? Because I have a pretty big favor to ask. But I think it's going to be good for you, too, so win-win and all that. You have a month off, and face it, if anyone needs a vacation, it's you."

Phoebe frowned. "It's really not in the budget."

"That's why this is so perfect. Actually I'm talking about more of a massive distraction."

"What kind of a distraction?"

Maya's expression turned impish. "The kind that involves a rugged, hunky cowboy."

Phoebe crunched on her chip. As she chewed, she eyed her friend. "You don't set people up," she said when she'd swallowed. "I've listened to more than one rant on the subject."

Maya laughed. "Fair enough. But this isn't a setup. I'm offering handsome man scenery, not a chance at a relationship." Her humor faded as she wrinkled her nose. "Frankly, I don't think Zane is capable of a relationship. His passions seem to be limited to running his ranch and being perfect."

"Zane your ex-stepbrother? That Zane?" The one Maya had been talking to earlier?

“That’s the one.” She picked up a chip but didn’t eat it. “I got a frantic call from Chase just before you got to my office.”

“Your other ex-stepbrother.”

“Right. He’s Zane’s half brother. Chase is seventeen, a complete cutie, a computer whiz and a constant disappointment to Zane. Of course anyone falling short of the ever-perfect ideal is a disappointment. Zane practically had a heart attack when I showed up after his father married my ex-showgirl mother.”

Phoebe nodded. While she didn’t know the details of Maya’s few years on the Nicholson Ranch—they had occurred before she and Maya had met—she’d heard bits and pieces.

“Anyway, Chase screwed up...again. He seems to be making a career of it. But this time, although I really hate to say it, I agree with Zane. He called me right after Chase.” Maya took a drink of her margarita. “Chase and a friend set up a website for a school assignment. They offered a cattle-drive vacation. Somehow the school project got on the internet. Don’t ask me how. Zane does move steers every spring—it’s sort of a back-to-his roots thing with him. He does it the old-fashioned way instead of by truck. He only brings a couple of cowboys with him—mostly the ones who don’t talk in more than two-word sentences. He would never take Chase or—God forbid—a tourist. He’d rather be staked out naked on an anthill.”

Phoebe saw the potential problem. “Did people actually sign up for the cattle drive?”

“You got it. Even worse—Chase and his little friend collected money. Five hundred bucks a head. Chase took the money and day-traded with it.”

“Day-trading? Is he crazy?”

“He’s seventeen and immortal. You remember what that was like. He lost everything through some company going under. I don’t understand it. Anyway, big brother is refusing to bail him out. Zane says Chase has to learn once and for all that there are consequences for his actions.”

“Let me make sure I understand. You’re saying Chase sold vacations for a fake cattle drive, and people sent money?”

The two women looked at each other in silence for a long moment. Phoebe felt her lips twitch. When she saw Maya’s eyes crinkle at the corners, she lost it. In unison, they burst into a fit of giggles that drew the attention of the people at the other tables, which only made them laugh harder.

“Who *does* that?” Phoebe asked when she could speak again.

“I know! It’s terrible and hysterical. He’s an evil genius,” Maya said, wiping a tear from her eye. “It’s bad. Bad! Stop laughing. I know it’s wrong, but it’s also just so funny. That’s the part Zane doesn’t get. Someday, when Chase is a famous inventor, this is going to make a great story.”

The waiter showed up with their food, and Maya waited until he left before continuing.

“Zane and I went round and round for half an hour. People are expecting a vacation, and Chase played with their lives. We discussed everything from military school to jail time for the kid. Actually it was kind of interesting to have Zane want my opinion.”

“So what did you decide?”

Maya smiled. “What I never would have guessed. On Saturday morning, a group of city slickers will be showing up on the sacred ground that is the Nicholson Ranch. Zane is going to take them on a cattle drive, along with Chase. He’s going to give the kid all the crap jobs, hoping to teach him a lesson.”

Phoebe considered the information. On the one hand, she could appreciate Zane’s frustration. On the other, she could relate to Chase. She’d been a screwup her whole life, too.

“Did Chase want you to rescue him?”

“Yes, and I was forced to tell him no. But as a way of compromising, I agreed to come along on the cattle drive. When I told Zane, he was actually pleased.”

“Why?”

“I’ve nearly always taken Chase’s side. I think he wants me to see him for who he is, or some such nonsense.” Maya shrugged, her green eyes darkening. “The thing Zane can’t seem to figure out is that I already know Chase. I’m very aware of his flaws. But knowing about them doesn’t make me care about him any less. That would be an unknown concept to Zane. Anyway, the point of this story is to invite you along. You love animals and you’ve earned a vacation.”

“A cattle drive?”

“Why not? You claim to like the outdoors, and as long as Zane doesn’t open his mouth and actually speak, he’s pretty easy on the eyes.” Maya grabbed a chip. “You work hard all the time. Do something for yourself. You can use my frequent-flier miles.”

The offer was tempting, Phoebe thought. She had a couple of weeks until her interviews, and she *had* just sworn off taking care of the world.

“I’m tempted, but my idea of the rugged outdoors is watering the plants on my patio. I’ve never been close to a horse. Aren’t they big and smelly?”

“They don’t smell half so bad as the steers, but we can stay upwind.” Maya smiled. “I think we’ll have fun. Besides, after what you’ve been through, you could use a break. You’ll be able to think more clearly from the back of a horse.”

Phoebe would never in a million years have thought of going on a cattle drive. But she’d promised herself that she was going to make changes and try new things. She was going to reinvent herself. Maybe the new Phoebe Kitzke would enjoy a cattle drive.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll go.”

“You won’t regret it,” Maya promised. “I already have a flight booked for Friday afternoon. I can’t get away before then because I have a bunch of video segments to edit. But I was hoping you wouldn’t mind going tomorrow. Just to distract Zane. He’s so furious with Chase, I’m afraid they’re going to get into a fistfight or something.”

Phoebe stared at her friend. “You’re crazy.”

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but if you were there, Zane would have to behave.”

“I’m not going to show up two days early. I’ve never even met the man. I can’t arrive on his doorstep with no warning.”

“Oh, I’d warn him,” Maya promised.

Phoebe shook her head. “No. I’ll go with you on Friday. Not before.” Besides, her no-more-favors vow was only an hour old. She couldn’t violate it yet.

Maya shrugged. “Okay. That’s fine. I shouldn’t have asked. It’s just I worry about Chase. He was so young when his mom died. Zane practically left him to raise himself. Plus, he’s really vulnerable right now, what with trying to figure out girls and think about college. And he’s the only family I have.”

Phoebe grabbed another chip and tried not to feel as if she’d just kicked a kitten. Maya’s tactics were completely transparent. She was trying to guilt Phoebe into doing what she wanted. There was absolutely no way it was going to work.

### CHAPTER THREE

PHOEBE’S FLIGHT TOUCHED DOWN in Sacramento a little after three o’clock on Wednesday. She’d spent most of the flight from Los Angeles calling both herself and Maya names. She absolutely could not believe she’d given in so easily. One or two protests and she was as unyielding as bread pudding.

Now she was going to have to explain her presence to a man she’d never met.

She headed for the baggage-claim area to collect her two suitcases. Not knowing what June weather was like in the mountains, she’d brought plenty of clothes to layer, along with several pairs of jeans, and some boots she’d dug out from the back of her closet. The boots were a reminder of a brief but intense fondness for all things Western.

While waiting for the luggage to arrive, she tucked her headset into her carry-on. When she hadn’t been berating Maya and herself, she’d been listening to self-improvement audio books and

working on her mind-centering meditation. Unfortunately the former tended to make her doze off and the latter had a three-part breathing technique that started her coughing. Not something to endear her to her seatmates.

She glanced around, noting several men, but no one fitting Zane's description. Maya had claimed he looked like Adam Levine. One of *People* magazine's sexiest men alive.

Phoebe was skeptical and more than a little nervous. What was she going to say to an Adam Levine look-alike cowboy on the drive to the ranch? She'd tried to rent her own car, but Maya had insisted she would never find her way.

Five minutes later Phoebe had wrestled her two bags off the carousel and hooked them together so she could wheel them outside. She remained escort-less. Okay, so she would give Zane thirty minutes, then she would find a shuttle to Fool's Gold and figure out her next move. If she had to she could always—

The sliding doors opened, and a man entered the baggage area. A tall, dark-haired man with incredibly broad shoulders, a cowboy hat and a gaze so penetrating Phoebe knew he could probably tell what color her panties were.

He moved with the kind of stride and purpose of someone who was never indecisive, confused or anything other than in charge. He was gorgeous. Adam Levine gorgeous. Of course.

Any small shred of confidence she might have cultivated from her self-help books went belly-up like a zapped bug. She tried to brush off the last of the peanut dust from the front of her yellow T-shirt and wished for the millionth time in her life that she was tall, blonde, blue-eyed and stunning. Actually, right now she would take any one of the four.

"Phoebe Kitzke?"

The man had stopped in front of her. He had a deep, beautiful voice that made her thigh muscles quiver. This close she could see the multiple shades of deep blue that made up his eyes. He didn't smile. On the whole she would say he looked about as far from happy as it was possible to be while still breathing.

"I'm Phoebe," she said, afraid she sounded as tentative as she felt. Why hadn't Maya warned her? Saying Zane was good-looking was like saying summer in the desert was warm.

"Zane."

He held out his hand. She wasn't sure if he wanted to shake or take her luggage. She erred on the side of good manners and found her fingers engulfed in his.

The instant heat didn't surprise her, nor did the melting sensation. Everything else was going wrong in her life—it made sense for her body to betray her, too.

She mentally jerked her attention away from her traitorous thighs and noticed that he had a really big hand. Phoebe tried not to think about those old wives' tales. She tried not to think about anything except the fact that she was going to kill Maya the next time she saw her.

"Nice to meet you," she said when he'd released her. "Maya says the ranch is some distance from the airport, and I really appreciate you coming all this way to collect me."

His only response was to pick up her luggage. He didn't bother with the wheels, instead carrying the bags out as if they weighed as much as a milk carton. Uh-huh. She'd nearly thrown out her entire back just wrestling them into the car. While in the past she'd never been all that interested in men with muscles, she could suddenly see the appeal of well-developed biceps.

Zane headed for the parking lot, and Phoebe trailed after him. He didn't seem to be much of a talker. That could make the drive to the ranch incredibly long.

He drove a truck, which didn't surprise her, but the fact that he held the passenger door open for her did. When her foot slipped on the metal step, he grabbed her elbow and gave her a little push into the cab. After stowing her luggage in the area behind his seat, he climbed in himself and settled next to her.

He towered over her as much while seated as he had while standing. Phoebe fastened her seat belt, then gave him a quick glance. Her heart did a one and a half somersault with a half twist at the sight of his profile. He looked good enough to be on a coin.

As Zane drove toward the exit, Phoebe searched frantically for a topic of conversation. Nothing brilliant came to mind. She nibbled on her lower lip as she considered risking the truth. When nothing better occurred to her, she decided to dive right into the cowboy-infested water.

“So this is really strange, huh?”

Zane glanced at her but didn’t speak.

She cleared her throat. “Me being here. I mean you don’t know me from a rock, and I’m going to be staying at the ranch for a couple of days. Maybe we should get to know each other, so the situation isn’t so awkward.”

“If you don’t feel like you belong, why did you come?”

She spent a good three seconds mentally swooning over the sound of his voice before processing his words. He wasn’t exactly welcoming.

“Well, um, several reasons,” she said, stalling, then couldn’t think of any but one. She sighed. “Maya guilted me into it.”

“What did she tell you? That I keep Chase locked in a tower and feed him bread and water?”

Phoebe winced. “Not exactly.”

“But close.”

“Um, maybe.”

Zane’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. “She’s always had a soft spot for Chase.”

“He must be really smart. That must make you proud. I certainly couldn’t design a website and entice people to sign up for a cattle-drive vacation.”

Zane’s ever-so-perfect mouth tightened. “He lied, stole and committed fraud. Pride doesn’t much enter into it for me.”

Phoebe hunched down in her seat. “If you’re going to put it like that,” she mumbled and turned her attention to the scenery.

Signs of civilization quickly gave way to rugged isolation. A mile marker along the side of the road announced that Fool’s Gold was forty-two miles away.

She’d read up on the little town last night. Their slogan was The Destination for Romance. She cast a sidelong glance at Zane. Somehow, she didn’t think the slogan would hold true for her. The man could not be less interested in her.

Mountain peaks rose in the distance. She caught glimpses of white-capped currents in a river that flashed between the thick trees along the side of the road. No doubt the area was teeming with wildlife. Phoebe liked little forest creatures as much as the next person, just so long as she didn’t have to worry about them scurrying across the road or showing up on a serving platter.

What would it be like on the ranch? She’d never been on one before, hadn’t even seen one except on TV or in the movies.

“So are there lots of cows?” she asked before she could stop herself. “On the ranch, I mean.”

Zane didn’t spare her a glance. “Some.”

“Like twenty?”

He glanced at her then, before turning his attention back to the road. “We run several thousand head of steers. Those are the ones that end up on your barbecue. I have another few hundred head of cows for breeding purposes.”

“No bulls?” she asked, unable to keep from grinning.

He sighed the sigh of the long suffering. “A dozen or so.”

“A dozen bulls for a few hundred cows?”

Mr. Hunk-in-a-hat, who had put his hat on the seat between them when he’d climbed into the cab, chuckled. “Yup.”

“Yet another example of our patriarchal society ignoring the rights of cows.”

“You worried about cows’ rights?” He sounded both incredulous and amused. “You a lawyer?”

“No. And I’m not concerned about cows’ rights. Of course I want them treated humanely, as any civilized person would, but I’m not crazy.”

“What are you, then?”

“What?”

He glanced at her. “If you’re not a lawyer, what are you?”

“Oh.” For a second she thought he’d been referring to her mental state. “I work in real estate.”

Fortunately Zane didn’t ask any questions about her career. She didn’t think that telling him she’d been suspended for litigation would improve his opinion of her. At least he was talking. She tried to think of more cattle-related questions.

“How long have you been in the ranching business?”

“All my life.”

Silence. Zane Nicholson wasn’t exactly chatty. Was it her or was it his personality?

“Do you ever sell the cattle for something other than food?”

Zane shifted in his seat. Had he been anyone else, she would have assumed the question made him uncomfortable. But he was too in-charge—too self-assured. Besides, what about it was embarrassing?

“Sometimes I’ll sell off a few cows if we have too many.”

“That makes sense. What about the bulls? Ever have too many of those?”

“Most of them become steers.”

She didn’t want to think about that. “So steers are boy cows?”

“That’s right.”

“What makes you decide who gets to have a really good life and who gets to be a burger?”

“Various factors. I’ve been working on genetically improving the herd.”

“So a new bull with favorable characteristics would get to stay a bull.”

He nodded.

“Sounds interesting,” she said, because it really was. Who knew that ranchers worried about genetics?

“You’re probably not going for things like eye color,” she said without thinking.

Zane didn’t even roll *his* eyes. “Not really.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I work with several universities. We have breeding experiments. I also sell to other ranchers.”

“Your bulls?”

There was that seat squirm again. “No.”

Not bulls? “Cows?”

“Sperm.”

Phoebe blinked. “From the bulls?”

He nodded.

“You sell bull sperm?”

He nodded again.

Wow. There really were infinite ways to make a living. So how exactly did one get the sperm from the bull? She shook her head. Not something she wanted to know, she decided. Although she was intrigued by the question of what sort of marketing campaign would be most effective. Still, some subjects were better left unexplored, and this was definitely one of them.

She tried to think of something else to say. Anything, really. But how did one top bull sperm as a conversational gambit?

Maybe it was better if one didn’t try.

\* \* \*

THEY TURNED OFF the main highway, and Phoebe sat up straighter in her seat, eager for a glimpse of Fool's Gold. Zane had rolled down his window a few miles back, and fresh-scented mountain air filled the truck. A few years ago, a reality show had been filmed in the town. She and Maya had had a standing date to watch it together. Phoebe couldn't believe the place was as quaint as it had seemed on TV, but Maya had insisted it was more so.

Welcome to Fool's Gold, proclaimed a sign surrounded by lush red-and-yellow flowers in the shape of a heart.

Zane turned right onto Lakeview Drive.

Phoebe caught her breath. "It's so pretty!"

To their left, Lake Ciara sparkled in the mid-morning sun. To their right, children played in a large park under the watchful gazes of their mothers and of the mountains beyond. A huge, old oak tree provided shade for a couple stretched out on a pink blanket with their baby.

Just past the park, downtown Fool's Gold rose up, though it didn't rise up very high. She didn't see a building that was more than three or four stories tall, and only a few of those. The shops were neat and tidy. An American flag flew at every corner, and baskets of flowers hung from the other lampposts along the block. A banner spanned the width of the street, advertising the Summer Festival in two weeks.

Zane pulled into a parking spot in front of a two-story blue brick building with a yellow awning. "Mitchell Tours" was painted in bold, white letters on the shop's window.

"I've got some business in here for a few minutes, to arrange for pickup of the other guests later this week," he said. "Do you want to wait in the truck or walk around?"

"I'd love to see the town."

By the time she got her seat belt undone, he was holding open her door. She felt a small flush of warmth as he helped her from the tall truck. Being short had its advantages, she thought. Although he might not be happy she was here, gentlemanly manners were ingrained in him. She had to admit she liked it.

"We'll meet back here in fifteen minutes," he said before turning toward the shop.

"Aren't you going to lock the truck?"

"Not necessary."

The door swung shut behind him, and Phoebe was left standing on the sidewalk, wondering whether she'd heard him right. No need to lock the truck, even with her suitcases in the backseat and his window rolled down? She'd heard about places like that but had always assumed the people who lived there were fictional—or idiots. Zane didn't strike her as stupid, and her body's lingering reaction to his touch confirmed that he was very much a real man.

She turned left on Frank Lane and was pleased to find a bookstore halfway up the block. It made sense to have a print book for when they were out on the cattle drive, rather than relying on technology that would need to be recharged.

"Welcome to Morgan's Books." A trim man with neatly clipped gray hair greeted her with a smile. He wore a brown button-down shirt a few shades darker than his skin and tan slacks with a crisp crease down each leg. "I'm Morgan. Please let me know if you need any assistance. Otherwise, feel free to wander."

"Wandering in bookstores is one of my favorite things in the world," she replied with a smile.

"I like you already."

She quickly found the latest Liz Sutton mystery and was thrilled to see a "Signed by local author" sticker on the cover.

One of her favorite authors lived in this small town? She carried her treasure under her arm as she browsed the fiction section. When she glanced at her watch, she was shocked to discover that twelve minutes had passed.

Somehow, she had the feeling that cowboy Zane would not appreciate being kept waiting. She paid for her book, promised to visit again before she left town, and raced back to the truck.

Zane wasn't there yet. But two old ladies were. They were well into their seventies, both about the same height with white hair and papery pink skin. The thin, curly-haired one with no makeup was dressed in a plush green tracksuit with bright white sneakers, while the plumper one wore a full face of makeup, including false eyelashes, and a prim flowered dress with thick, nude pumps. Oddly, they were sitting on the front bumper of Zane's truck, and the one in the tracksuit was pointing a handheld video camera toward the front window of Mitchell Tours.

After a moment of hesitation, Phoebe opened the passenger door of the truck. The old ladies hurried toward her.

"This is Zane Nicholson's truck," the one in the flowered dress said.

"I know."

"Are you with Zane?"

Phoebe glanced at the one in the tracksuit, whose video camera was now pointed at her. Since it was about eighteen inches away, she could imagine how huge her face must look on the screen.

"Don't mind me," the old lady said. "Just keep talking like I'm not even here. And...rolling."

"Are you with Zane?" the other one repeated.

"I'm...yes, I guess. Sort of."

"Scoop!" The one in the tracksuit pumped a fist in the air.

"You're his girlfriend?"

Phoebe looked around, expecting to see the ladies' caretakers coming toward them with white coats and apologies, but although the town was bustling, no one seemed to be paying them any attention. Should she call the police? The hospital? Or was this kind of nosiness normal in a small town? Maybe this was why Zane hadn't locked the truck, because he knew these two busybodies would guard it for him?

Not sure what to do, she said, "I'm here for the cattle drive."

The women exchanged a meaningful look and grinned. Somehow, it made Phoebe even more uneasy.

Just then, the door to Mitchell Tours opened, and Zane stepped out. When he saw the old women, he seemed to falter for a moment, but it happened so fast that Phoebe wasn't sure.

The one in the green tracksuit hurried to the front of the truck, with her video camera pointed toward Zane. "What can you tell us about the cattle drive?"

He shot a look at Phoebe. She shrugged helplessly.

"Sorry, ladies, no time to talk. We have to get back to the ranch."

Relieved, Phoebe pulled herself up into the truck. Zane didn't come to her side to help her this time, but even after this short association with the determined women, she understood that time was of the essence in making a clean getaway. As she settled in the passenger seat, she could swear the video camera was focused on Zane's butt when he climbed behind the wheel.

"Who are they?" she asked under her breath.

"Eddie and Gladys," he muttered, then shot her a dark look. "You told them about the cattle drive?"

"They ambushed me, and, no. They seemed to know about it already." At least that was what she thought the knowing look meant. She could be wrong.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"Just a couple of old ladies who live in town."

"And the camera?"

He sighed heavily. "I have no idea. When it comes to those two, the less you get involved, the better."

"Are you scared of them?"

“Let’s just say I know when to take on the bear and when to walk around. When it comes to those two, I walk around.”

His mouth turned up at one corner. His face was transformed when he smiled, even when it was a half-smile given halfheartedly. Wow. A sexy cowboy with a sense of humor could be dangerous. And while she’d always avoided danger in the past, for some reason, she found herself wanting to move just a little closer.

Play with fire, she reminded herself. Only getting burned seemed like a small price to pay.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

“GET READY, TOMMY,” Lucy Sax told her brother. She kept her voice down, like Mrs. Fortier was always telling her, only this time it wasn’t to keep from getting on Mr. Fortier’s nerves. She spoke quietly so that no one could hear them.

Her brother shook his head. “I don’t wanna.”

Lucy planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. “You have to. I can’t do it—I’m not any good. You’re the best, Tommy. And you know we need the money.”

Tommy, ten and older than Lucy by two years, shook his head again. “It’s wrong.”

Lucy already knew that boys were more important, more special, than girls, but she didn’t get that at all. From her viewpoint, boys weren’t very bright. Wanting or not wanting didn’t have anything to do with it. Need mattered more.

They stood close together by the vending machines in the brightly lit bowling alley. Sound exploded all around them, from the smash of a ball crashing into the pins to the buzzing and beeping of the video games to the frantic laughter of desperate children.

Lucy glanced past her brother to all the nervous couples bowling with children they didn’t know and would never adopt. She hated coming to the social events. What was the point? No one was ever going to adopt her or Tommy.

For a long time she’d hoped they would get new parents. She’d agreed to wear her best dress, to smile and be polite. Until one day she’d overheard some adults talking about her and Tommy.

“Mongrels,” the man had said. “Not white, not black, not Hispanic.” He’d turned to his pretty pale-skinned wife and reminded her that they wanted to adopt a white or Hispanic child.

Lucy had saved her tears until she was in bed and no one would see. Then she’d given in to the sorrow. At the next social event, she’d concentrated on charming the African-American couples, but they didn’t seem any more interested in mongrel children. It was then that she realized she and Tommy were never going to find a home. They had each other, and that was all that mattered.

Now she glared at her brother. “I’m going to start doing cartwheels right now,” she told him. “While everyone is watching me, you’re going to take the money.”

He nodded, looking miserable. For a second Lucy felt bad about making him do it, but then she thought about all the times Mrs. Fortier sent them to bed without supper. It was one of her favorite punishments. Lucy had heard her talking to a friend once; Mrs. Fortier had said that at the end of the day, she liked her peace and quiet.

So Lucy and Tommy needed the money for food, and sometimes for clothes. She kept track of every penny, and they never spent it on candy or toys. She was saving, too, so that when they were bigger they could run away together.

But that was for later. Right now she had a plan.

After smoothing her hair, she marched to the front of the bowling lanes. She waited until Tommy was in position, then she smiled so wide her cheeks hurt and started doing cartwheels. Everyone turned to watch. On her third one, she deliberately fell. She’d misjudged the distance and really slammed her knee into the hardwood floor. It wasn’t hard to force out a few tears.

Instantly all the adults crowded around her. Lucy did her best to look small and hurt. From the corner of her eye, she saw Tommy moving toward the purses.

\* \* \*

“HEL-LO, GORGEOUS.”

Phoebe looked around as she stepped out of Zane’s truck. Standing next to the passenger door was a tall teenager with bright, inquisitive eyes and a welcoming smile. He looked enough like Adam Levine to make it easy for her to guess his identity.

“You must be Chase,” she said.

“In the flesh. And you’re Phoebe.” He looked her over from head to toe, then sighed. “Maya said a lot of great things about you, but she never mentioned you were a goddess.”

The outrageous compliment made Phoebe laugh. “Hardly,” she protested, knowing that with her brown hair, brown eyes and unspectacular features she was little more than average.

“My heart is pounding a mile a minute,” Chase said, moving closer. “Want to feel?”

The driver’s-side door slammed shut. “Don’t you have chores?” Zane growled.

Chase took a step back, and his smile cranked down about 50 percent.

“All done. Even the extra ones you gave me. I got started early so I could be finished to welcome Phoebe.” Keeping a wary eye on his brother, he swept his arms open wide. “Here it is. Several thousand acres of Nicholson family ranch. Nicholsons have owned this land for five generations.”

She looked around at the rolling hills that stretched out to the horizon. They were a mere fifteen minutes outside of Fool’s Gold, but the only signs of civilization were two wind-power generators on a hill miles away. A two-story ranch house sprawled out on her left. To the right were several barns and corrals. Trees crested the nearest hill. In the distance she could see cattle. Lots of cattle.

“Amazing,” she said honestly.

“If you’re so fired up about playing host,” Zane said, his expression both fierce and closed, “I’ll let you take care of her luggage and show her to her room.”

He put his hat on his head, nodded once at Phoebe and stalked away.

She stared after him for a second. He looked as good from the back as he had from the front. Her hormones yelled out catcalls of appreciation which—fortunately—only she could hear. But however impressed she might be with him, Zane obviously didn’t return her feelings. He practically burned rubber in his haste to get away.

Chase brightened the second Zane was gone. “How was the drive?” he asked as he walked around to the other side of the truck and pulled her suitcases out from behind the driver’s seat where Zane had placed them.

“Good.”

“Did Zane talk?”

Phoebe glanced at him, not sure of the question.

Chase hoisted her luggage with the same ease Zane had shown and started for the house.

“He’s not much of a talker,” he explained as he walked. “I can’t figure out if the act of forming words is physically painful, or if he just doesn’t have anything to say.”

She thought about the drive from the airport. “Things started out well,” she admitted. “Then we sort of stalled about twenty minutes into the drive.”

Yup—nothing like asking about bull sperm to shut down a conversational exchange.

“Twenty minutes, huh?” Chase glanced back at her over his shoulder and grinned. “I’m impressed. Most people get a grunt. He must really like you.”

Phoebe laughed again. “Yeah. He was so overpoweringly impressed he couldn’t wait to get away.”

She followed Chase up the front steps onto a wide porch that seemed to wrap around the whole house. While the teenager had a long way to go before he was as hunky as his older brother, he was still pretty impressive. Good-looking, funny, easy to talk to.

“I’ve been had,” she muttered more to herself than to him.

“What do you mean?”

“Maya got me out here early by implying you were neglected and pitiful all on your own. I thought I was going to be rescuing a lost waif.”

Chase winked. “I am. Can’t you tell? Zane practically keeps me chained up in my room.”

“Uh-huh. I’m all in tears over your broken spirit.”

Chase chuckled, then led the way into the house. They entered a large foyer that opened up into a living room big enough to hold an international peace conference. The furniture—chintz-covered chairs and a matching dark red sofa—wasn’t new, but it looked cared for and comfortable. Several other rooms led off the foyer, but Chase headed for the stairs, and Phoebe was forced to follow. She told herself there would be plenty of time to explore later, and the house would be worth the wait.

Even the little bit she could see was amazing. She’d never seen anything like the intricately carved stair rail, and she’d been in plenty of million-dollar-plus mansions. Old photographs lined the stairway wall, and she caught glimpses of black-and-white pictures of multiple generations of men who looked nearly as handsome as Zane.

At the top of the stairs, the landing led both left and right. Chase went right and stopped in front of a door at the end of the hall.

“You’re in Maya’s old room,” he said. “There are two beds. Normally you wouldn’t have to share, but with everyone else arriving, we’re a little tight on space.”

For the second time since she’d met him, Phoebe saw the humor fade from Chase’s eyes. His mouth twisted slightly.

“I don’t mind if Maya doesn’t,” she said. “Plus, I’m here first, so I get to pick the good bed, right?”

Chase’s smile returned. “Right.”

He pushed open the door and carried her suitcases inside. Phoebe followed. The room was large and bright, done in various shades of lavender. A pansy-print wallpaper decorated the walls from the white chair rail up, with lavender paint on the bottom half. Two beds sat on either side of a big window covered with crisp white curtains. There was a dresser topped with a TV against one wall, two doors on another and a second window on a third.

“There’s a bathroom in there,” Chase said, setting her luggage on one of the beds. “The other door is the closet.”

“It’s great.”

“Want to see my room?”

Chase might be seventeen, but at that moment, he looked about ten. She nodded.

“I’d love to.”

“Sweet.”

He led her back down the hall to a room just off the stairs. Phoebe stepped into a messy room with a full-size bed, a massive computer and more electronic equipment than she’d ever seen outside of a Best Buy. Dials glowed, lights flashed, boxes beeped. Circuit boards lay scattered like so many discarded toys.

Chase sank into the only chair in the room and began typing on the keyboard.

“A couple of my friends and I are working on some really great special effects on the computer. You know, for websites. We’re also working on a robot, but it’s not going that great. I think the main problem is in the programming, but it’s hard to tell because everything else is screwed up, too.”

He finished typing and pushed back from the desk. Phoebe stepped forward and saw a three-dimensional swirling object on the screen. Chase handed her a pair of 3-D glasses. When she slipped them on and stared at the screen, the spiraling blob seemed to leap out at her.

“I like it,” she said, handing the glasses back.

He grinned and rose. “I have a baseball I caught when Zane took me to San Francisco a couple of years ago. It was a fly ball, bottom of the third. Dodgers against the Giants.”

He picked up the ball from a shelf above his bed and held it out for her inspection.

“Wow.”

“There’s also the—”

“I doubt Phoebe wants to see your entire collection of treasures right now.”

At the sound of Zane’s voice, they both jumped and turned toward the door. Phoebe had a bad feeling that she looked guilty...mostly because she felt that way. Which was crazy. She hadn’t done anything wrong.

Zane stood leaning against the doorway, his arms folded over his chest. He looked strong and unmovable. Maya’s claims about Chase’s broken spirit didn’t hold water when compared with the teenager’s outgoing personality, but Phoebe couldn’t help wondering what Zane was thinking as he studied his brother.

“Is your room all right?” Zane asked her.

She nodded. “Everything is great.”

“Maya wants me to take you to dinner in town.” He glanced at his watch.

Feel the love, she thought, not sure if she should call him on his lack of graciousness. “You don’t have to.”

“It’s fine.”

“Can we go to Margaritaville?” Chase asked. “I could go for nachos.”

“What you could go for even more is staying home and finishing cleaning all the guest rooms. There’s a pizza in the freezer. Elaine Mitchell’s going to pick up the greenhorns and Maya on Friday and bring them out to the ranch in her tourist van. You’ve got a lot of work to do before they get here.”

“But—”

Zane cut him off with a look, then turned back to Phoebe. “Meet me downstairs in an hour.”

Phoebe knew a dismissal when she heard one. Due to the fact that she was an uninvited stranger who had shown up with little warning, she didn’t feel that she was in a position to complain.

She gave Chase a quick smile, then moved toward the door. Zane stepped out of the way to let her pass. As she walked by him, the hairs on the back of her neck stood up and swayed in salutation.

\* \* \*

WHEN PHOEBE LEFT her room an hour later, she could hear Chase singing in a bedroom down the hall. She smiled. He was such a cheerful kid, a pure-hearted spirit. Forced to stay home and do chores, he’d decided he might as well make them fun.

She was a little nervous about spending the evening alone with his big brother, though. What would they talk about?

Zane was waiting for her at the base of the stairs. She stopped on the last step so that when he turned toward her, they were eye to eye.

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring anything dressier,” she said. She’d changed into white jeans and a pale, dusty purple top with an embellished scoop neckline.

His gaze traveled to her feet and back to her face. She thought maybe she read masculine appreciation in his raised brows.

“You’re fine,” he said.

So much for any appreciation. On his part, at least. “Give me a moment while I bask in the glory,” she murmured and stepped past him to the front porch and then down toward his truck.

Zane got there ahead of her. A neat trick explained by his much longer stride. He towered over her. He’d changed clothes, too, into dark blue jeans and a fitted white T-shirt that showcased his hard-earned muscles. His dark hair was still damp. An image flashed through her mind of him in the shower, water running over his broad shoulders.

He opened the door for her, then helped her into the truck. The masculine scent of his soap and shampoo wafted toward her as he climbed in beside her, making her limbs melt into the leather seat.

This felt like a date. It wasn’t, but still. Phoebe sighed. Maya had promised her a distraction, and Zane was certainly that. Too bad he didn’t seem to like her one bit.

\* \* \*

PHOEBE WAS A little relieved when Zane didn't park outside Margaritaville. After Chase had mentioned wanting nachos, it would seem mean to eat there. Instead she and Zane walked into a place called The Fox and Hound.

The restaurant had lots of dark wood and booths. There were English hunting prints on the wall. Campy, Phoebe thought happily, following the hostess to a booth and sliding in.

She told herself the quivering sensation she felt inside was because she was hungry and had nothing to do with the man sitting across from her. Then she felt bad for lying, if only to herself.

She took the offered menu but didn't open it. When they were alone, she glanced at Zane.

"Do you not like me or is this just your style?"

Zane's gaze was steady. Almost laser-like. She wanted to squirm but didn't. Nor did she look away.

"I like you fine," he said at last.

The low gravelly quality of his voice was so nice, she thought, before the actual words sank in. "Really?"

He sighed. "Why are you surprised?"

"You aren't exactly welcoming. I know you're doing all this to teach Chase a lesson, so it's not like you asked me to visit, but you didn't have to take me out to dinner just because Maya asked you to."

"You didn't have to say yes."

"I was hungry."

"So was I."

\* \* \*

ZANE KNEW THAT he and Phoebe were no longer talking about the same thing. At least not when it came to hunger. She would be thinking fish and chips, and he was thinking more along the lines of naked.

He wanted to tell himself it was simply because he was a man and she was a woman, but he knew it was more than that. As he'd admitted, he liked her. She was cute and funny. When she looked at him with her big brown eyes, he wanted to grab Tango and ride his horse into the sunset to save something for her. Talk about idiotic. He barely knew her.

Yet there was something about Phoebe Kitzke. An innocence, maybe. No, that wasn't right. It was how she seemed trusting. More fool her. Or maybe him.

Not that it mattered. Wanting wasn't having. She was here as Maya's friend. Possibly to keep watch over him so he didn't hurt Chase. Because Maya wouldn't trust him.

"You're looking fierce," Phoebe said.

Her hair was long and loose. Sexy. He deliberately steered his brain away from that line of thinking.

"My sister brings out the fierce in me."

"Because of how she's always thinking you're too hard on Chase?"

"Maya talks too much."

"She says less than you think," Phoebe told him. "It's more what she doesn't say. She worries about Chase."

"Everybody does."

Phoebe wrinkled her nose. "She worries about you, too."

He raised a brow. "I doubt that."

Phoebe raised her shoulders, then let them drop back into place. "Okay, maybe she doesn't say that exactly, but I know she does. We're friends."

"Being friends gives you insight?"

"Of course. It's not like being family, but it's close."

“Family can be a pain in the ass.”

“Maybe,” she said, “but it has to be better than being alone.”

Maybe if he didn't feel so responsible for Chase, he would be able to enjoy his brother more. As it was, he walked that precarious line between brother and father figure. He spent half the time annoyed with some of the boy's boneheaded decisions and the other half worried the kid was going to screw up his own life.

“An optimist.”

“You say that like it's a bad thing.”

“It's important to be realistic.”

She leaned toward him. “It's important to have dreams. To see the possibilities.”

He'd believed that once, he reminded himself. Before he'd destroyed what mattered most to his father. Before he'd understood that some things were unforgivable. No matter how much a kid tried to make them right.

Their server came by to take their drink order. Phoebe asked for a glass of red wine while Zane got a beer. When they were alone again, Phoebe leaned toward him.

“Tell me about Fool's Gold.”

“What do you want to know?”

He was expecting a question about the tourists, or the history. Instead she surprised him by asking, “What do you like best about living here?”

“It's what I know.”

She nodded slowly. “Because you've lived here all your life. I get that. You have a connection with the town and the rhythm of the seasons. You probably have friends from when you were really small.”

He stared at her. “You don't need me around for this conversation, do you?”

She laughed. “Sorry. I can get carried away.”

“That's okay.”

“So do you have friends from when you were little?”

“Sure.”

She glanced out the window. “I like the window boxes with flowers.”

“You should see this place at Christmas.”

Her eyes brightened. “All decorated?”

“Every inch.”

“That's so nice.” She jumped a little in her seat. “Oh, wow. Do you get snow? Are we high enough for snow?”

“There's nearly always a white Christmas.”

He had no idea why he was trying to sell her on the town. While he liked it well enough, he wasn't looking to join the tourist commission or whatever it was called. What did he care if Phoebe was impressed by Fool's Gold or not? Yet he found himself wanting her to think it was special.

Which made him a fool, and for the life of him, he couldn't say why he was bothering.

\* \* \*

C. J. SWANSON REFUSED to look at her husband, Thad. Instead she stared out the window and tried to ignore his words. He didn't understand...he would never understand. Yes, the problem was with both of them, but somehow she always felt guilty. As if there was something wrong with her.

“They're just kids,” Thad was saying. “Why would you want to deprive them of this vacation?”

“Why is it my responsibility?” she asked before she could stop herself. “Why do I have to be the bad guy? It's not my fault that the couple going with them had a death in the family. It's not anyone's fault.”

“C.J....” Thad reached out and touched the back of her hand.

She turned away again. “I can’t. You’re asking too much. What would be the point? We aren’t interested in them. They were horrible. That boy’s a thief, Thad. Have you forgotten? His sister is just as bad. She might not have taken the money, but I would bet you anything she put him up to it.”

“They’re just kids,” her husband said in his calm, reasonable voice. Normally she appreciated his willingness to see things clearly, without being blinded by emotion, but today he was really getting on her nerves.

“Con artists, you mean.”

C.J. tried not to sound bitter, but she didn’t think she was successful. After so many years of trying, after so many disappointments, she felt as if she had finally reached the end of the road.

She and Thad would never have children. Not their own and not any they adopted. She and her husband loved each other. They had a strong, healthy marriage. That would be enough—she would make it enough.

Beside her, Thad turned her hand over and laced his fingers with hers.

“I like them,” he said softly.

Her chest tightened. Of course he did. Because he was a good man. Because he always rooted for the underdog, whether it was in his personal life or in the courtroom. After fifteen years of practicing law, he’d been appointed to the bench where he could put all his idealistic notions into practice. Her husband, the man whom she had loved since the first moment she’d seen him seventeen years ago, *would* like a ten-year-old pickpocket and his con artist younger sister.

She turned her head to study his familiar features. The steady gaze of his blue eyes, the thinning blond hair worn in a conservative cut...not because he was conservative, but because he was cursed with unruly curls that made him look like an aging rock star. She visually traced the lines at the corners of his eyes and the firm set of his full mouth. He was a good man. A kind man. A man who loved her and never blamed her. He knew her better than anyone, knew what he was asking. How was she supposed to tell him no?

“All right,” she said softly. “We’ll take Lucy and Tommy on the cattle drive. One week, Thad. That’s all I’m willing to give them. Please, don’t expect to make it more.”

He smiled, then leaned forward and kissed her. “You won’t regret it.”

She didn’t answer. Instead she prayed that he was right. Between the two of them, they already had enough regrets for this lifetime.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“GOATS?” PHOEBE ASKED as she stared at the array of large, open pens. Several horned goats nibbled on their breakfast of hay and some kind of grain. “Didn’t you say that the Castle Ranch has goats, too?”

“Those are dairy goats. Heidi makes cheese.”

Phoebe shrugged. “And that’s different how?”

“These are cashmere goats,” Chase grinned. “Just imagine the horror of discovering a cattleman raising goats. They’re Zane’s most embarrassing secret.”

She supposed the romance of the Old West didn’t lend itself to goats the same way it did to cattle, but as far as she was concerned, four-legged grazing animals were all pretty much the same.

She’d sure seen plenty on her tour. The Nicholson Ranch was nothing if not huge. As they’d been on foot, she and Chase had only explored a tiny bit of it. She didn’t know the going price of cattle on the hoof, or the per acre value of land in this part of the country, but from what she could tell, no Nicholson was ever going to die poor.

Better than that, the land had been in their possession for generations. Phoebe wondered what it would be like to have roots and a history—a place to belong. Family.

“If he doesn’t like goats, why does he have them?” she asked.

Before Chase could answer, a man on horseback rode over a crest in the property. One minute there had been green grass and blue sky, while the next a tall silhouette appeared. Zane. Phoebe

watched, mesmerized. Her lone experience with riding a horse consisted of slow, sedate turns on a carousel. Not exactly the same as cow roping on the open range.

As she watched, he approached. He moved easily on the horse, riding or swaying or doing something so that he and the animal appeared to be one and the same. It was darned impressive.

As Zane got closer, his handsome features became clearer, which made her breathing increase. Chase might be the charming brother, but there was something mighty fine about Zane Nicholson.

Beside her, Chase groaned. "He's going to make me help Frank put together the kits for the cattle drive."

"What kits?"

Chase grimaced. "Supplies. Tents, eating utensils, first aid, that sort of thing. We have to take it with us and he's basically made me Frank's slave."

Phoebe wanted to ask who Frank was. She also considered pointing out that if Chase hadn't taken money from unsuspecting customers in the first place, none of this would have happened. But before she could say anything, Zane reined in his horse and dismounted. From the second his feet touched the ground, she knew it was going to be impossible for her to form coherent sentences.

However, Zane ignored her, instead turning his disapproving expression on his brother. "Frank's looking for you."

"I'll get there." Chase turned his back on his brother. "I was showing Phoebe the goats."

"Frank's waiting now. Folks'll be arriving tomorrow. We need to be prepared. If we're short on supplies, you'll have to head into town and pick them up."

Chase muttered something under his breath, but didn't overtly argue with Zane.

"Take Tango with you," Zane said, handing the reins to his brother.

Chase grabbed them, then turned his attention to Phoebe. Rebellion darkened his eyes and tightened his expression. "Sorry to cut this short. Maybe my brother will tell you all about the goats." Some of his annoyance faded as a smile pulled at his mouth. "They hold a special place in his heart."

With that, he left. Zane watched him go, then walked to the edge of the fenced pen and rested his arms on the top rail.

Dinner with Zane hadn't gone as well as she'd hoped. They'd started out okay, but early on, he'd gotten quiet. She wanted to tell herself it was because he had a lot on his mind, but in her heart, she had a feeling he simply didn't find her interesting. Which was too bad, because he was the most compelling man she'd ever met.

"You think I'm too hard on the boy."

His words were so at odds with what she'd been thinking that it took her a second to catch up. "Not unless you're beating him in secret."

She couldn't be sure, but she thought maybe one corner of his mouth turned up. "I've thought about it from time to time."

Phoebe made a quick mental list of Chase's recent infractions, then admitted the possibility that he'd been a handful all of his life.

"Thinking and acting are two different things."

Zane's response was a quiet grunt. She tried to figure out if that was better or worse than a loud grunt. When she couldn't come up with a decision, she turned her attention to the pen in front of them.

"Tell me about the goats," she said.

"What do you want to know?"

Like she had a basic "Ten facts about goats" list she needed filled. "Are they friendly?"

Zane shot her a look that wasn't especially pleasant...or flattering. Okay, so if he didn't like the question he could have volunteered information on his own.

"They can be tamed. It takes time and effort."

Somehow she doubted he was willing to put either into the goats.

"Chase implied it's a problem for a cattle rancher to have goats. Is that true?"

Zane shifted his weight, then stepped back from the pen. “Come on,” he said and started walking.

Phoebe figured she had the choice to follow him or not. Even as she told herself he wasn’t very social and obviously didn’t like having her around, her hormones kicked in, sending instructions to her legs. Before she could decide if she wanted to follow Zane or not, she found herself dutifully trailing after him.

They circled around a barn, passing more pens with more goats. There were dozens and dozens of the horned, furry critters. An entire goat colony. Sort of a Nicholson Ranch Goat-ville.

Zane stopped in front of a pen filled with small goats. Instantly her kitten-and-puppy-loving heart contracted at the sight of baby goats. They were small and sweet-looking with big eyes and dark noses they had yet to grow into.

She crouched down by the fence and sighed. Her heretofore silent biological clock offered a soft but meaningful *tick*.

“Just weaned,” he said.

“They’re darling.”

“They’re for sale.”

Phoebe gasped. “You’re allowing some stranger to rip apart goat families?” The second the words were out, she realized how stupid they sounded.

“I didn’t mean that,” she said hastily as she scrambled to her feet. “It’s not as if goats have an actual social infrastructure that will be disturbed by separation or anything. And if they’re old enough to be weaned, then I guess they’ll be okay on their own.”

Zane’s expression remained unreadable throughout her monologue, for which she was really grateful. When she was done, he let the silence linger. A neat trick that made her words echo in her brain, sounding more ridiculous with each replay.

Finally he asked, “What did you say you did in LA?”

“I sell real estate.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Beverly Hills.”

“Ever been on a horse?” he asked.

“Just a wooden one.”

Zane turned away. She thought he might have muttered something under his breath. As it hadn’t sounded like “golly darn” she didn’t ask him to repeat it.

“Why did Maya drag you out here?” he asked.

Phoebe didn’t think telling him that Maya was hoping she would be a distraction, and a possible sex partner, would be something he was longing to hear.

“I needed a vacation,” she said. Unfortunately the statement came out sounding a whole lot more like a question.

Zane grunted.

Even annoyed and monosyllabic, he was still intensely appealing. Phoebe liked the way he squinted in the bright sun. Lines formed by his eyes, which gave him the appearance of being wise beyond his years. It probably wasn’t true, but hey, this was her bout of physical attraction and she could take it in any direction she liked...as long as she wasn’t foolish enough to act on it.

“Chase implied you hate the goats,” she said to change the subject and get the attention off her. “Why do you keep them?”

She expected him to say something like they made a lot of money—and based on how much she’d paid for her only cashmere twinset, she knew that had to be true. Or maybe that he was doing an experimental genetic ranch-type breeding program thing with them.

Instead he said, “My dad bought them. He saw them as a way to diversify. He wanted to end up with the biggest herd in the continental US.”

Oh, man. Phoebe wanted to stomp her foot on the soft grass and offer up her version of a four letter word. This was not right. Maya had always painted a picture of Zane that was coldhearted, taciturn and humorless. In her mind he'd been more of a robot than a real person. Which had made her instant—and somewhat embarrassing—physical attraction interesting, but not significant. Because there wasn't a real person inside. But if Zane was human and nice, she could be in real trouble. After all, a man who kept goats just because his dad had liked them couldn't be all bad. Right?

“Were you and your father close?” she asked.

“No.”

Phoebe almost laughed. For one split second she'd been so darned sure she had a window into the real Zane Nicholson. Her heart had melted at the thought of getting to know the inner man. So much for that theory.

She started to ask why, if he and his father hadn't been tight, Zane bothered to keep the goats, but before she could, one of the kids walked up to the fence and rubbed its head on the corner post.

Phoebe instantly dropped to her knees. “Hi, baby. How are you?” She stuck her fingers through the metal fencing to pet the little guy. The soft fur, or fleece, or hair or whatever it was delighted her. Right before amazingly strong teeth clamped around her fingers.

She screamed. The loud noise frightened the kid into releasing her, and she jerked her fingers back through the fence. Before she could study the damage, Zane grabbed her by her arm and pulled her to her feet. He took her hand in his and examined the injury.

Several things occurred to her at once. First—that they'd never stood this close together before. He was so big, tall and broad that he made her feel positively delicate by comparison. Second—for a man who had spent his morning on a horse, he smelled really good. All clean and woodsy. Third—the instant his fingers touched her, the pain miraculously vanished. Talk about amazing.

“Skin's not broken,” he said as he turned over her hand. “Tell me if this hurts.”

He bent her fingers back and forth. His warmth sent sizzling jolts of awareness slip-sliding all through her body. Despite the heat filling her, something was wrong with her lungs because it was impossible to breathe. He touched her gently, as if he didn't want to hurt her.

The logical part of her brain turned cynical, announcing that he was simply concerned about a lawsuit by a goat-bitten city girl. The romantic side of her suddenly understood all those country songs about cowboys. What was it that country star Lacey Mills had sung? “Go ahead, cowboy. Rope me in.” It was a brief battle, with romance emerging victorious.

Whatever emotional distance she might have been able to maintain was lost the second Zane lightly squeezed her hand and smiled. She'd never seen him smile before. If she'd been able to breathe, he would have taken her breath away.

“I think you'll live,” he said. “Just stay away from the goats.”

“Okay.”

The single word was the best she could do under the circumstances. Zane continued to look at her. Even better, he kept her hand in his, his thumb rubbing up and down the length of her fingers. Over and over. Up and down. It was very rhythmic. And sexual.

Her thighs took on a life of their own, getting all hot and shaking slightly. Her mouth went dry, her breasts were jealous of the attention her hand was getting and her hormones were singing the “Hallelujah Chorus.” Obviously she needed intensive therapy...or maybe just sex.

Zane's eyes darkened. The muscles in his face tightened, and he stared at her with a hawkish expression. Had he been anyone else, she would have sworn that he'd just had a physical awakening of his own. Awareness crackled around them, like self-generated lightning. The tightness in her chest eased just enough for her to suck in a breath, which was really good, because the next second it all came rushing out again when he kissed her.

Just like that. With no warning, Zane Nicholson bent his head and claimed her mouth.

It wasn't a movie-perfect kiss. They didn't magically melt into each other. Instead their noses bumped, and somehow the hand still holding hers got trapped between them. But all that was fairly insignificant when compared with the intense, sensual heat generated by the pressure of his lips on hers.

That part was exactly right. Not too hard, not too soft. When he moved against her, need shot through her body. Had she been breathing again, she would have whimpered. Had he tried to pull away, she would have fallen at his feet and begged him not to stop.

Somehow he released her hand and pulled his free. He wrapped his arms around her and hauled her against him so her entire body pressed against his. The man was a rock. Big, unyielding and warmed by the sun. She wanted to snuggle even closer. She wanted to rip off her clothes and give the goats something to talk about. She wanted—

He licked her lower lip.

The unexpected moist heat made her gasp as fire raced through her. Every singed nerve ending vibrated with need for more. The masculine, slightly piney scent of him surrounded her. Operating only on instinct, she parted her lips to allow him entry. She had a single heartbeat to brace herself for the power of his tongue touching hers. Then he swept inside and blew her away.

It was like being inside the space shuttle on takeoff. Phoebe might not have any personal experience with space flight, but she could imagine. The powerful force between them left her weak and clinging to his broad shoulders. She trembled and needed and ached with equal intensity.

His tongue brushed against hers again. He tasted of coffee and mint and something wonderfully sensual and sweet. His mouth seemed designed for kissing. Maybe it was all that non-conversation. Maybe talking too much undermined a man's ability to kiss. She didn't know and didn't care. All that mattered was the way he stroked her, touched her, teased her. He cupped her head with one hand and ran his other up and down her back. If only this moment would never end.

But it did. A sharp bark from somewhere in the distance brought Phoebe back to earth with a rude thunk. She suddenly became aware of being pressed up against a really good-looking stranger, kissing in front of a goat pen. Apparently Zane got a similar wake-up call, because he stepped back at the same second she did. At least the man was breathing hard. She would hate to think she was the only one who had been affected.

"Okay, then," she said when she realized that all feelings to the contrary, she still could breathe.

Zane continued to stare at her.

She swallowed. "Did you want to say something?"

Anything would be fine. Just any old reaction. As long as he wasn't going to say it was all a mistake. That would really annoy her. Or maybe she was making a big deal out of nothing. Maybe he kissed lots of women out here by the goat pens.

"I have to get back to work. Can you find your way to the house?"

She blinked at him. That was it? Okay. Fine. As long as she didn't try to walk on legs that were still trembling, she could pretend nothing had happened.

"Sure," she muttered. "No problem."

He nodded, then bent down and picked up his hat. She frowned. When exactly had that fallen off? He straightened, opened his mouth, then closed it. She wasn't even surprised when he turned and left without saying a word. It was just so typical.

When she was alone, Phoebe tried to work up a case of righteous indignation. When that didn't work, she went for humor. If nothing else, she had to give Maya credit for the promised distraction. Oh. She also had to remember that as soon as she found out what constituted a treat on the baby-goat food hit list, she would be sure to send a thank-you gift.

\* \* \*

ZANE FIGURED THE morning had been a cheap lesson. If one city slicker could get bit just walking around the ranch, what kind of trouble were ten greenhorns going to get into on a cattle

drive? As he headed for the main barn, he considered the potential for broken legs, stampeding cattle and raging cases of poison oak. If he was lucky, that would be the worst of it. He didn't want to consider what would happen if he wasn't lucky.

Most of the time he didn't allow himself second guesses. They were a pointless waste of time. But for once he wondered if he'd made the right decision when he'd chosen to host a cattle drive instead of simply paying back the deposits and taking the money out of Chase's hide with a summer full of rough physical work.

That boy was going to be the death of him.

He jerked open the barn door and stalked toward his office. But instead of entering it, he passed through to the file room—an open area with dozens of file cabinets filled with breeding information, records for the ranch and medical histories for every Black Angus steer, cow or bull to step foot on the Nicholson Ranch. He crossed to the back wall where he studied a map of the area, including his ranch, the Castle Ranch to the east and the Konopka place to the west, and of course, the nearby town of Fool's Gold.

His normal route for the cattle drive took him about a hundred and fifty miles from one end of Nicholson land to the other. It was an easy two weeks of lazy rides, wide-open spaces and plenty of time to just be without the hassles of everyday life. It was also about as far from the main ranch buildings as he could get, outside of coverage from the cell tower he'd had built several years ago. He took a few trusted men, some supplies and Tango, his best horse. Primitive didn't begin to describe the conditions. They were his favorite two weeks of the year.

But not this year. Not with ten vacationers who, like Phoebe, had probably never been on a horse. He would—

Phoebe.

The reality he'd been doing his damndest to ignore crashed in on him with all the subtlety of a bull after a cow. Desire flared, making him hot, horny and uncomfortable. He swore, stopped, remembered how good she'd kissed, then swore again.

What had he been thinking? Which was a stupid question because he hadn't been thinking. He'd been reacting. One minute he'd been worried that she'd lost half a finger to an inquisitive kid, the next she'd been close and soft and he'd looked at her mouth, then *bam*. He'd kissed her. Like an idiot. Like a man who hadn't kissed a woman in far too long.

The latter was true, but he ignored it, along with the burning need and his throbbing hard-on. She was Maya's friend—someone he barely knew and didn't plan to like. He didn't go around kissing women on impulse. He didn't do anything on impulse. When he figured it was time to scratch an itch, he found someone appropriate. Someone who understood his world and respected his responsibilities. Not brown-haired city girls with big eyes and shy smiles. Not women from LA. Not Maya's friends.

He knew his ex-stepsister had sent Phoebe up to the ranch to keep an eye on him until she could arrive to do it herself. For as long as she'd known him, Maya had made it clear she considered him a potential child abuser who had it in for his brother. Her idealistic view of Chase frustrated him, as did her need to always take his side. The kid was a screwup, plain and simple. If someone didn't take him in hand and fast, he was going to spend his whole life never getting one thing right.

Zane knew the danger of that. Maya thought he didn't care, but she was wrong. He cared enough to be a bastard. Let Chase hate him all he wanted, just so long as the kid had a chance at a life without regrets.

Zane stared at the map without seeing it. Honesty insisted he admit Chase got one thing right. He was a born ladies' man. From the second he'd learned to talk, he'd been charming females into giving him extra cookies and letting him stay up late. Now that he was a teenager, Chase probably spent his dates charming his way into girls' pants. Zane had given him the safe-sex lecture more times than either of them could count and kept the kid supplied with condoms. The last thing either of them needed was an unplanned pregnancy.

Zane had yet to meet a female who didn't fall for his brother's easy words and open smile. Unlike Zane, Chase always knew the right combination of sincerity, charm and flattery. He wouldn't kiss an attractive woman, then walk away without saying a word. Not that Zane had been talking all that much before he'd kissed Phoebe.

He could talk to the cowboys on his staff, explain the lineage of any of his prize bulls to a potential buyer and go toe-to-toe with the toughest, orneriest negotiator this side of the Mississippi, but with women...especially women like Phoebe...he clammed up tighter than a virgin in church.

The sound of footsteps distracted him. He turned his attention back to the map in front of him as Frank entered the room.

"Sent Chase into town for supplies," the older man said. "I got bad news."

Zane braced himself.

"We needed a couple more tents, and we're a saddle short."

Zane winced. A tent wouldn't be expensive, but a good saddle was. "See if maybe Clay Stryker has one we can borrow. If not, keep track of how much we put out for this. I'll take it out of Chase's summer earnings."

"Sure thing, boss."

Zane moved closer to the map. "We can't take them on a real cattle drive. We'll follow the river toward the edge of our property that borders the Strykers', then turn west here." He indicated the spot on the map.

Frank slid off his hat and rubbed the top of his head with his free hand. "You're going in a circle?"

"A big one. We'll never be more than four hours' ride from either here, the Strykers', or Reilly Konopka's place."

Frank's expression tightened with surprise. "I didn't know you'd started talkin' to him."

"I haven't." If he had his way, he never would. "We have to stay sharp. If there's an emergency, I can't risk us being too far from help."

He knew he could count on the Stryker men, and while Reilly Konopka might be a crusty old pissant of a man who would happily leave Zane out in the cold to freeze to death, he wouldn't turn away a stranger in need.

"Arrange for supplies to be delivered every day. You'll have to write up a schedule for the men. Have Cookie plan a menu this afternoon."

Frank's eyes widened. He looked as if someone had just run over his favorite dog. "Boss, you're not taking Cookie with you."

It was more of a plea than a question. "No one else can cook for shit. What am I supposed to feed them?"

"But without Cookie, one of the boys will have to cook for those of us left behind."

"There's enough stuff frozen to get everyone through a week."

"Ah, jeez." Frank's shoulders slumped. "Why'd you have to take Cookie with you?"

Zane ignored the question. Frank knew he was stuck on the ranch. With Zane gone, Frank would be in charge.

"I'll have the two-way radios with me. With the new tower in place, you'll be able to reach me any time."

Frank was still grumbling about losing the ranch cook for a week.

"Want to trade?" Zane asked flatly.

His foreman pressed his lips together. They both knew taking ten novice riders out on a fake cattle drive through wilderness was nothing short of five kinds of hell. June weather was usually good, but there was always the possibility of a freak snowstorm, a sizable flash flood, spooked cattle, bears, runaway horses, snakebite and saddle sores.

Frank slapped him on the back. “You have a fine time out there, boss. The boys and I will keep things running back here.”

“Somehow I knew you were going to say that.”

## CHAPTER SIX

PHOEBE STRETCHED OUT on her bed, aimlessly flipping channels on the television. Despite the fact there was a sci-fi marathon on one channel, *Sleepless in Seattle* on another and some really great fake diamond earrings on QVC, nothing held her interest. She told herself it was because she was in unfamiliar surroundings. Or maybe it was the fact that except for the cowboy who had delivered her dinner on a tray at six-thirty, she hadn’t seen another living being. Well, not a biped. From her window she could see countless cattle, a few horses and even a couple of dogs.

But she knew none of that really mattered. The reason she was restless, edgy and more than a little unsettled had nothing to do with her lack of company and everything to do with a soul-stirring kiss she’d experienced that morning. Strange men were not supposed to be able to elicit that kind of a response from her. She’d always been a kiss on the second date, sex in the third or fourth month kind of gal. More than one potential boyfriend had become frustrated and ended things because she wasn’t ready to bare all by week four.

The first time it had happened, she’d been heartbroken. The second time, she’d been resigned. In her world, making love needed to be a significant event. She was interested in emotional connection, not volume. Which put her out of step with a lot of guys she met in LA, but that was okay. She wasn’t going to find the sense of belonging she desperately wanted by jumping into bed every fifteen minutes. Which was all really interesting, but not the least bit helpful in explaining her reaction to Zane.

If he’d tossed her to the ground and started ripping off her clothes, instead of being outraged, she would have helped. She would have done it right there, in front of God and the goats. The big question was why?

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. She flipped off the TV, then sat up. She’d returned her dinner tray to the kitchen, so it was unlikely anyone was here to bus her dishes. Which left one of two possibilities for her visitor. Chase or Zane.

In her mind, it wasn’t even a close vote. She crossed her fingers and walked to the door. When she pulled it open, she fully expected to see Chase standing in the hallway, because that was how her luck was running these days. Yet the man in front of her was tall, good-looking and had a mouth, she knew from personal experience, that could reduce grown women who should know better to puddles of liquid desire.

She blinked and wondered when the finger-crossing technique had actually started working.

“Evening,” Zane said.

It was a pretty wordy opening for him.

Phoebe debated inviting him in, then decided it would be too much like an offer to sleep with him. Instead of stepping back and pointing to the bed, which was really what she wanted to do, she moved into the hallway, shutting the door behind her, and did her best to look unimpressed.

“Hi, Zane. How are the preparations coming?”

He gave her one of his grunts, then shrugged. She took that to mean, “Great. And thanks so much for asking.”

They weren’t standing all that close, but she was intensely aware of him. Despite the fact that he’d probably been up at dawn and that it was now close to ten, he still smelled good. He wasn’t wearing his cowboy hat, so she could see his dark hair. Stubble defined his jaw. She wanted to rub her hands over the roughness, then maybe hook her leg around his hip and slide against him like the sex-starved fool she was turning out to be.

“Maya’ll be here tomorrow,” he said. “Elaine Mitchell is bringing her out to the ranch with all of the greenhorns in her tourist bus.”

She had to clear her throat before speaking. “Maya called me about an hour ago to let me know she’d be getting here about three.”

He folded his arms across his broad chest, then leaned sideways against the doorjamb beside her. So very close. Her attention fixed on the strong column of his neck, and a certain spot just behind his jaw that she had a sudden urge to kiss. Would it be warm? Would she feel his pulse against her lips?

“She doesn’t need to know what happened,” Zane said.

Phoebe couldn’t quite make sense of his words, and he must have read the confusion in her eyes. They were alone, it was night and the man seemed to be looming above her in the hallway. She’d never thought she would enjoy being loomed over, but it was actually very nice. She had the feeling that if she suddenly saw a mouse or something, she could shriek and jump, and he would catch her. Of course he would think she was an idiot, but that was beside the point.

“Between us,” he explained. “Outside. She doesn’t need to know about the kiss.”

A flood of warmth rushed to her face as she understood that he regretted kissing her. She instinctively stepped backward, only to bump her head against the closed bedroom door. Before she had time to be embarrassed about her lack of grace or sophistication, he groaned, reached for her hips and drew her toward him.

“She doesn’t need to know about this one, either.”

His lips took hers with a gentle but commanding confidence. Her hands settled on either side of the strong neck she’d been eyeing only seconds ago. His skin was as warm as she’d imagined it would be. The cords of his muscles moved against her fingers as he tilted his head to a better angle.

His hands were still, except his thumbs, which brushed her hip bones, slow and steady. His fingers splayed over the narrowest part of her waist and nearly met at the small of her back. She wished she could feel his fingertips against her skin, but her thin cotton top got in the way.

He kept her body at a frustrating distance from his. In fact, when she tried to move closer, he held her away even as he continued the kiss. Lips on lips. Hot and yielding. She waited for him to deepen the kiss, but he didn’t. And she couldn’t summon the courage to do it herself. Finally, he drew back and rested his forehead against hers for a long moment.

“Do me a favor,” he said. “Try to be a little more resistible. I don’t think I can take a week of this.”

Then he turned on his heel, walked to a door at the end of the long hallway, and went inside. She stood in place, her fingers pressed against her still-tingling lips. More than a minute passed before she realized she was smiling.

\* \* \*

PHOEBE HOVERED SLIGHTLY behind Zane in front of the Nicholson Ranch house, watching a cheerfully painted bus chugging along the winding entrance road. As it got closer, the tinny music coming from the speaker mounted on top increased in volume. It sounded like an ice-cream truck. Chase stood by the goat pens, well out of his brother’s reach. She couldn’t blame him for being nervous. Zane’s annoyance with the fake cattle-drive situation seemed to be growing as the bus approached.

She tried not to notice how good Zane looked in his cowboy hat and jeans, but she couldn’t seem to help cataloging his impressive features.

Okay, day one his appeal had been interesting. Day two it had been amusing, but this was day three. She needed to get over him, already. Sexual attraction had never been a big part of her life. Sure, she enjoyed the physical perks of a romantic relationship as much as anyone, but she’d never sought them out. To her, the emotional connection was so much more important than the act. So why did she practically have a hot flash every time she was around Zane?

She had a feeling that Maya would be able to offer sound advice. The only downside was having to admit the problem in the first place. Not only was Zane Maya’s ex-stepbrother, which made things sort of weird, but Maya had been the one preaching Zane as a distraction. If Phoebe admitted to her

attraction, Maya would gloat about being right and tease Phoebe unmercifully. Maybe it would be easier to allow her questions to go unanswered.

Before she could decide, the bus pulled to a stop in front of them. A mural of downtown Fool's Gold had been painted in primary colors on the side of the bus, with "Mitchell Adventure Tours" emblazoned just above the windows. The door at the front opened with a whoosh.

A young girl rushed down the steps yelling, "It's them. Real cowboys."

Zane muttered under his breath to Chase, who had joined them. "You've got little kids involved in this mess?"

Behind her, a small boy and their parents disembarked. The parents seemed to be in their early forties, while the kids were both under twelve. Phoebe found herself playing hostess. She wasn't surprised by Zane's reticence, but Chase could usually be counted on to be a charmer. Maybe the reality of what he'd done was sinking in.

"Thad and C. J. Swanson," the tall blond man introduced himself. "This is Lucy and her brother, Tommy."

The kids didn't look anything like their fair-haired parents. Tommy was painfully thin, with long legs and dark, shaggy hair. Lucy shared her brother's coloring, but instead of being long legged, she was petite and delicate-looking, with a full, rosebud mouth. Both kids had skin that was the most beautiful shade of caramel.

"You two must be excited that your parents brought you on a cattle drive," Phoebe said.

The girl, Lucy, shook her head. "They're not our parents. We don't have parents. Are we going to eat soon? Tommy and I didn't have breakfast or lunch today."

Phoebe glanced at her watch. It was after two. Involuntarily she turned to the Swansons, who looked as surprised as she felt.

"We picked them up at ten to catch the shuttle plane," C.J. said uneasily. "They never said anything about not having breakfast. We only have them for this week. The people who were supposed to bring them on this cattle drive backed out at the last minute. Death in the family. There were pretzels on the flight..." Her voice trailed off.

Phoebe returned her attention to the children. Lucy's matter-of-fact statement "we don't have parents" brought back too many memories. She'd lost her folks when she'd been about Lucy's age. With no relatives to take her in, she'd been placed in a series of foster homes. While nothing bad had happened in any of them, she'd never forgotten what it was like to be all alone in the world.

"Do you want to get something to eat?" she asked.

Lucy and Tommy looked at each other, then at her. They both nodded.

Zane said, "Chase, take them to the kitchen."

The party of four trailed after Chase, leaving Phoebe momentarily alone with Zane. Sudden nervousness made her want to wipe her palms on her jeans. Instead she cleared her throat and tried for neutral.

"They seem nice."

Zane raised his eyebrows. "Sure. Skinny, starving kids. I can hardly wait for the rest of the folks to turn up. Maybe we'll have a rock star next. Or some business executive who wants to bring his laptop along so he can work while riding."

She wasn't sure what to say to that, so she ignored his comments. "Thanks for letting the kids go get something to eat."

His gaze narrowed. "What has Maya told you about me?"

The only thing she could think of was her friend's claim that Zane looked like Adam Levine. "Ah, what do you mean?"

"You're surprised that I wouldn't want kids to starve. I figured she'd claimed I was a jerk, but it sounds like she's also telling you that I'm mean to children."

“No, nothing like that.” She took a step back. “Maya thinks you’re a little, you know, uptight maybe.”

His expression hardened, and she wanted to suck back the words.

“But not in a bad way.”

“Right.”

Zane turned his attention to the bus. Phoebe got a bad feeling when she caught sight of the worn sandals, tie-dyed T-shirts and woven hats on the next couple to disembark.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.