

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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BIG SKY CENTENNIAL

# HER MONTANA COWBOY

Valerie Hansen



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## Her Montana Cowboy

### Аннотация

The Man of Her Dreams Julie Shaw is up to her ears in parade preparations...and cowboys! As the mayor's daughter, she needs to make sure the centennial celebrations for her beloved hometown of Jasper Gulch, Montana, go off without a hitch. Surely that's why she's feeling so flustered. It couldn't have anything to do with the handsome Ryan Travers. Of course she'd noticed the visiting rodeo star with the sparkle in his eye. But Julie is way too sensible to fall for his obvious appeal. As the town gossips about a century-old mystery, Julie's thoughts keep drifting to the charming cowboy. Despite her father's objections, she may soon find herself roped in...by love. Big Sky Centennial: A small town rich in history...and love.

## The Man of Her Dreams

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Big Sky Centennial: A small town rich in history...and love.

Mayor Jackson Shaw,

the Jasper Gulch Centennial Committee,

and the Good Citizens of Jasper Gulch, Montana,

Cordially Invite You

to the Grand Opening Ceremonies

of the Jasper Gulch Centennial.

Featuring the Jasper Gulch Centennial Rodeo

and the Official Unveiling of the

Jasper Gulch Time Capsule

Happy birthday, America! Happy birthday, Jasper Gulch!

As the tiny all-American town prepares to celebrate its one hundredth anniversary, folks are expecting pomp, circumstance and hometown pride. What they aren't expecting is a six-

month whirlwind of romantic surprises. Opposites will attract, sweethearts will reunite, secrets will be revealed and mysteries unraveled. It all begins when debonair rodeo rider Ryan Travers ambles down Main Street and steals off with small-town girl Julie Shaw's heart....

\* \* \*

Big Sky Centennial:

A small town rich in history...and love.

VALERIE HANSEN

was thirty when she awoke to the presence of the Lord in her life and turned to Jesus. In the years that followed, she worked with young children, both in church and secular environments. She also raised a family of her own and played foster mother to a wide assortment of furred and feathered critters.

Married to her high school sweetheart for many years, she lives in an old farmhouse they renovated with their own hands. She loves to hike the wooded hills behind the house and reflect on the marvelous life she's been given. Not only is she privileged to reside among the loving, accepting folks in the breathtakingly beautiful Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, she also gets to share her personal faith by telling the stories of her heart in Love Inspired Books.

Life doesn't get much better than that!

Her Montana Cowboy

Valerie Hansen



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He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care.

—Psalms 95:7

To my Joe, who is with me in spirit, looking over my shoulder and offering moral support as I write. He always will be.

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Chapter One

The glorious day! Finally!

“Here they come!” Julie Shaw jumped up and down, clapped her hands, whistled and shouted with the rest of the spectators lining the parade route.

After months of preparation and thousands of volunteer hours, the Jasper Gulch centennial celebration was finally kicking off with their Fourth of July parade.

Proud beyond words, Julie placed her hand over her heart to honor the American flag as the mounted color guard rode beneath one of the vibrant banners spanning the street and passed the reviewing stand filled with local dignitaries. Seeing the entire two-block stretch of old-town Main Street decked out in red, white and blue, with myriad flags flying, brought tears to her eyes. What a country. What a town. And what a beautiful state Montana was.

Her eldest brother, Cord, was one of the riders chosen to carry the fluttering Stars and Stripes and open the festivities, following a short speech from their father, Mayor Jackson Shaw, and a prayer by the new pastor, Ethan Johnson.

Feeling blessed, Julie watched the passage of the various homemade floats bearing veterans, the Little League team, 4-H members and many others. Her happy heart was beating in time with the drums of the Jasper Gulch Bobcat Band as it marched by. Those kids might not have fancy, matching uniforms, but they were all dressed in their best Western wear, as was she, and their enthusiasm was contagious.

Following the float bearing Miss Jasper Gulch came a mounted group of rodeo participants, led by the clowns, who much preferred to be referred to as bullfighters. Of all the events scheduled for the six-month-long celebration, it was the rodeo Julie loved best.

Her sister, Faith, elbowed her in the ribs. "Hey, look."

"I know. I'm looking." Julie blushed and fanned herself with her straw Stetson to exaggerate her reaction. "Wow!"

"And you said there were no handsome men in Jasper Gulch."

"Not exactly. What I said was, there's nobody around here I'd consider marrying, no matter what Dad wants."

"It's the same thing."

Julie shook her head. "No, it isn't." She would have continued to spar with her older sister if her attention had not become focused on one passing cowboy in particular.

She couldn't decide what it was about the man that had caught and was holding her attention. It had simply happened. There was something so special, so compelling about him she could not tear her gaze away.

He sat comfortably in the saddle with his hat pulled low enough to shade his dark eyes. Fringes of dark hair were visible at his nape, leaving the rest of his hair to her imagination.

It would be thick and wavy, she told herself. And it would feel

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Another poke in the ribs startled Julie. She jumped.

"Whoa," Faith said, giggling. "Earth to Julie. Where was your mind just now?"

"I'm not telling." The warmth of her flushed cheeks did the talking for her and caused her sister to laugh louder. Julie tried to quiet her. "Shh. You're making a scene."

"Not me, baby sister. You should see your face. It's almost as red as your hair."

"We have auburn hair, not red," Julie countered. "I just wish I didn't blush so easily."

"Comes with our blue eyes," Faith told her. "That, and freckles, which I could do without."

"Don't be silly. You have beautiful skin."

"Speaking of beautiful, take a gander at the barrel racer your cowboy is riding with."

"He's not with..." She'd been going to finish with "anybody," until she looked back at the procession. The good-looking rodeo

rider who had caught her eye did seem to be in the company of another woman. Not only that, the horses they were riding sported similar tack. They certainly looked as though they were a couple.

Nevertheless, Julie shaded her eyes with one hand and boldly studied the man. She hadn't met nearly all the rodeo contestants because many had arrived in Jasper Gulch very recently. Their normal schedule would have had them competing here for two or three days, then packing up and moving on to the next PRCA—Professional Rodeo Cowboys' Association—sanctioned rodeo. There were plenty to choose from and she was doubly thankful that so many talented contestants had opted to honor her town with their presence.

Not only that, some had agreed to remain or return for a second and third weekend. It didn't hurt that the invitational events included some of the biggest names in rodeo, plus monetary grand prizes and serious day money for the top qualifiers. That kind of reward was definitely worth vying for.

The muted clip-clop of hooves on the wide main street sounded soothing. If Julie had not been so keyed up, she might have been able to relax and enjoy the rest of the parade more. The sights were certainly pleasant enough—particularly one of them.

Suddenly deciding what to do next, she clapped her hat back on her head, turned away and started into the crowd lining the curb.

Faith grabbed her arm. "Hey! Where are you going? The

parade's not over.”

Exactly where was she going? Julie hesitated, her mouth slightly open. “I just...”

Her sister hooted as she let go. “You’re going to move up so you can watch those attractive guys ride by again, aren’t you?”

“Of course not.” That was true if she took the question literally. It was not guys, plural, she wanted to study more. It was just one of them.

Yes, it was crazy, she admitted to herself. And yes, it was a tad embarrassing. At least it would have been if she’d imagined for a second that the rider had even noticed her. Cloaked in anonymity, she had no qualms about watching him pass a second time. And maybe a third.

Julie shook her head, slightly disgusted with herself for even contemplating changing her position along the parade route. That didn’t stop her, though.

She approached the corner of Main Street and Shaw Boulevard, the street named after her ancestors. Here, the marchers would turn south toward the fairgrounds and rodeo arena. This would be a perfect place to wait and watch.

It occurred to her to wonder if she would even recognize the handsome cowboy again. In an instant, she had her answer. There was no way she’d ever forget him. It was as if his image had been permanently imprinted on her mind.

“I am certifiably unbalanced,” she murmured. “If Dad heard what I’m doing, he’d blow a gasket.” Knowing that her father

fully intended to choose her boyfriends, or at least vet them, she smiled. Wouldn't it be funny if she showed up at the picnic later on the arm of a rodeo rider?

Oh, yeah, like that's going to happen, she told herself wryly. Still, she began to work her way through the mass of bystanders lining the streets bordering the old bank building that housed city hall and the chamber of commerce. All she had to do was get close enough to peek over the heads of some children and teens standing at the very front. Being taller than Faith by a few inches had helped her see well before. This time, she aimed to put herself in an even better position.

Smiling and being as polite as possible, Julie said, "Excuse me? Please?" then "Thank you" as she wormed her way forward.

She reached her goal and looked up just as the group of riders began to arrive, found the man she was searching for and stared directly at him, never dreaming he'd pay any mind to her unjustifiable interest.

Her sharp intake of breath sounded a lot like a gasp. Her jaw dropped. The cowboy's glittering brown eyes were boldly meeting hers. She was captured as fully as if he'd dropped a lasso around her and pulled the loop tight to reel her in.

He inclined his head, touched the brim of his hat politely, smiled—and winked. At least she thought he did.

No, that wasn't entirely true. She dearly hoped he'd winked on purpose. At her.

\* \* \*

Ryan Travers was used to encountering rodeo groupies and had learned that the best ways to discourage them were to either face the problem boldly and announce that he wasn't interested, or to avoid them entirely. In the case of this pretty admirer, he decided to adopt a wait-and-see attitude.

Besides, he thought, letting his grin widen, she was different somehow. Naive, maybe? She certainly looked it. Then again, looks could be deceiving. In a small community like Jasper Gulch the girls were likely to be... He started to think of derogatory terms, then abandoned them in favor of simply enjoying the view.

The rider beside him inclined the brim of her pink Stetson. "Heads up, Travers. You have an admirer. The one in the bright blue shirt."

"I noticed. Kinda cute, too."

"If you like sheep."

"Beg your pardon?" He knew Bobbi Jo was competitive in the arena, but he had no idea she carried that attitude over into her personal life. "What have you got against her? You don't even know her."

"Matter of fact, I met one of her brothers yesterday and he pointed her out. She was helping decorate the fairgrounds' picnic area. She actually does raise sheep."

"Here? Why?"

"Apparently for their wool. She's got some kind of internet business selling yarn or some such thing. Sounds pretty dull."

Ryan huffed. "Sounds downright suicidal to me. Sheep in

cattle country? How does she get away with it?"

"It might help that her daddy is Jackson Shaw, the town mayor and owner of the largest ranch in this part of Montana. I guess he can afford to designate some of his pasture land to his little girl's sheep ranching."

"Ah, I see." Too bad, he added to himself. The lovely young woman seemed hospitable enough, but chances were her well-to-do parents wouldn't welcome an itinerant cowboy into her life, any more than the old-time ranchers had a hundred years ago, back when Jasper Gulch was founded.

Bright sunlight peeked between the flat facades of the commercial buildings, temporarily blinding him. When he looked back for the auburn-haired sheep rancher, she had gotten lost in the sea of similar cowboy hats.

He stood in the stirrups of the barrel-racing horse he'd borrowed from Bobbi Jo's string and scanned the onlookers for a bright blue shirt. There was no sign of the young woman.

The horse instantly reacted to his change of balance, prancing as if getting ready to race into an arena and compete.

By the time Ryan got the fractious horse under control, the riders had crossed Massey Street and were on their way out of town to the fairgrounds.

What shocked him most was his clear disappointment over losing sight of the mayor's daughter. Try as he might, he could not shake the feeling that they would meet again.

Matter of fact, he assured himself, he would see that they did,

one way or another.

\* \* \*

Children on bikes decorated with red, white and blue crepe-paper streamers followed the main part of the parade, taking care to dodge the droppings the horses had left behind. Julie had recruited members of the local 4-H club to follow and clean the street. That was one of the jobs she'd volunteered for years back when she was a member, and she saw no reason to abandon a tradition that helped build character.

That notion made her smile. It was her membership in 4-H and, later, Future Farmers, which had eventually led to her current career, and she was truly grateful. Raising sheep for wool was not only lucrative, it was rewarding in emotional ways. Seeing those tiny lambs struggling to their feet for the first time was akin to watching a sunrise on a summer day. Those woolly babies were a new beginning, new life, always bringing waves of joy as well as making her feel connected to the land, to nature, in a very basic way.

The rumble of an ATV approaching behind her caused Julie to step aside. It stopped next to her and the driver tipped his battered Western hat. "Howdy, Miss Julie. Like my new camo-painted Mule?"

Seeing ninety-six-year-old Rusty Zidek traveling via anything other than a horse or his dented antique Jeep struck her funny, but she managed to keep from giggling. "Hi, Rusty. I know that thing is called a Mule but it's still a surprise to see a veteran

cowhand like you behind the wheel.”

“Compliments of your daddy.” The grizzled old man’s grin crinkled his leathery skin, lifted the corners of his bushy gray mustache and exposed one gold tooth among his others. “He made me traffic manager and gave me these wheels. Pretty spiffy, huh?”

“Absolutely. We’ll need your help a lot with all the visitors in town. Parking at the fairgrounds is bound to be a nightmare.”

“Not with me in charge, it ain’t. I got me a bunch of retired yahoos with nothin’ better to do and put ’em to work directin’ traffic.”

Julie chuckled. “Good for you.”

“How’s about a ride? Or did you bring your truck?”

“No. I hitched into town with Dad so I wouldn’t add to all the extra traffic.” She stepped in and settled on the bench seat next to the bony nonagenarian. “Much obliged.”

“No problem, ma’am. Where to?”

“The picnic grounds, I guess.”

Julie was sorely tempted to ask him to drop her near the encampment where some of the rodeo participants had grouped their trailers, but quickly thought better of it. Competition was scheduled to last for three weekends. There was no hurry finding out who anybody was.

She huffed, then glanced at Rusty, hoping he hadn’t noticed. It wasn’t just anybody she wanted to learn more about. It was that cowboy who had smiled and winked at her during the parade.

And the first thing she'd need to learn, she reminded herself, was whether or not he was with someone, namely the gorgeous cowgirl in the pink Stetson. If he was spoken for, Julie figured she might as well go home and card wool or rake the barn. There was no way she could hope to compete with a blonde, shapely woman who looked as if she were Miss Rodeo America, or recently had been.

Man, that was a depressing thought, she countered, disgusted for having entertained it. Either she believed her life was in God's hands or she didn't. It was that simple. And that complicated. The hardest part of trusting her faith completely was making sure she stayed out of the Lord's way instead of trying to figure out His plans and help them along.

Pastor Ethan Johnson was one of the few people in whom she had confided a tiny bit of frustration with her personal life because she could tell he understood. He should. New in town, he was basically in the same boat: single, eligible and determined not to be pushed into anything by well-meaning do-gooders.

Julie's biggest problem was with her father. He wanted all his kids married and having families, as if that would help him hang on to the spirit of Jasper Gulch that was their heritage.

She had nothing against tradition. She simply wasn't positive her dad was right about some of the notions he insisted on espousing, such as leaving the old bridge the way it was instead of improving it. For a man who had been so instrumental in putting together this six-month-long commemoration of their history, he

certainly was close minded about other things.

Yeah, like who I should marry, she added with a heavy sigh. If she “accidentally” ended up in the company of Wilbur Thompson, one more time she was going to scream. Oh, Wilbur was nice enough. He was just not the man for her, no matter how successful he was or how much money he’d invested in the town via his position as bank president. No man in a three-piece suit belonged on a sheep ranch. Period.

“And I don’t belong in some fancy town house, either,” Julie muttered. She didn’t realize she’d spoken aloud until Rusty chuckled.

“What makes you say that?”

She shrugged. “I was just thinking about Dad. I’m only twenty-four, but he acts like I’m already over the hill and keeps pushing me to marry some rich guy. If I gave in, I’d probably end up living in town and trying to be somebody I’m not. Just picturing it gives me the shivers.”

“I can sure understand that, Miss Julie. You and me, we’re a lot alike.” He laughed raucously. “If I was fifty years younger I’d propose to you myself!”

Julie joined his amusement and patted the back of his weathered, gnarled hand as it rested on the steering wheel. “Rusty, if I were fifty years older, I’d accept.”

She nearly busted up laughing when he waggled his bushy gray eyebrows at her and said, “In that case, I’d be forty-six and you’d be seventy-four. I’m afraid you’d be way too old for me.”

## Chapter Two

Ryan joined Bobbi Jo at her horse trailer, took the time to properly store her saddle and bridle, then fed and watered the horses for her before following his nose and sauntering over to the picnic grounds.

Someone had covered a bunch of long wooden tables with white paper to serve as disposable tablecloths. Centerpieces displaying tiny flags, red and blue flowers and ribbons sat on each, while a bank of serving tables held enough food for the entire town, and then some.

The aroma of barbecued burgers and hot dogs mingled with that of baked beans, making his mouth water. Cold potato salad and coleslaw finished the main course, while several men were busy in a separate area slicing watermelon and offering it to the revelers filing past the dessert table.

Not one to hang out with only rodeo contestants the way most of his friends did, he freely mingled, chatting amiably as he filled a foam plate. Because he was concentrating on the food, Ryan failed to notice who happened to be dishing up coleslaw.

When his server's hand stopped in midmotion, he looked up—and into the widest, bluest eyes he'd seen since he'd noticed the same young woman watching the parade.

He grinned at her. “Yes.”

“Um, yes what?” she asked, remaining immobile.

“Yes, I'd like some slaw and yes, I'd also like to know your name.”

She would have plopped the spoonful of cabbage into his hot beans if Ryan had not hurriedly turned his plate.

“Easy, there. Don’t make me spill the beans.”

“What?” Her cheeks flamed. “Oh, sorry.”

“Okay. Now, what’s your name?”

“Julie.”

“Pleased to meet you, Julie. I’m Ryan. Ryan Travers.”

From behind him came a testy “Hey, quit holdin’ up the line. Other folks are hungry.”

Ryan nodded politely, balancing his plate on his palm and touching the brim of his hat with his free hand. “Guess I’d better move along. I’ll be sittin’ right over there by the watermelons, Miss Julie, in case you want to join me later.”

“Aren’t you going to eat with the other cowboys? Dad reserved a couple of tables for all of you.”

“I’d just as soon make myself comfortable where I don’t have to worry about impressing anybody. It’s so crowded over there nobody will miss me.”

Although she didn’t comment, didn’t even smile, he got the feeling she’d do her best to at least stop by before he was done eating. Why he’d invited her was almost as much a puzzle to him as her obvious personal interest. He’d chosen the life of a traveler a long time ago and, although he was no longer a rookie, he was far from ready to retire at twenty-seven. Given the ages of many of his fellow riders, he probably had ten more good years in him, provided he didn’t suffer any bad injuries.

That was the main drawback with earning a living as a rodeo rider. Every time the chute opened, he stood a chance of being hurt. Maybe even crippled. Or killed. He never allowed himself to dwell on worst-case scenarios, but they lurked in the back of his mind just the same.

Which was one of the reasons he avoided romantic entanglements. That, and the conviction he didn't deserve the kind of lasting happiness he'd seen some of his buddies find along the way. There were too many dark shadows in his past, too many sins for which he'd never forgive himself, let alone share with a naive, innocent woman like Julie Shaw. Her daddy was the town mayor. That pretty much said it all.

Ryan sighed, unwrapped his plastic fork and dug into his food. Sure, it was a boost to his ego to have a pretty girl notice him, but that didn't mean he intended to take her interest seriously. He'd tell her about his rodeo career, impress her properly, then bid her goodbye the way he always did when he met someone interesting on the road.

That was one of the perks of traveling from rodeo to rodeo. Nobody expected him to hang around, so there were no hurt feelings when he left town. His life was simple. Fun. Rewarding when he won and tolerable if he happened to finish out of the money, which, thankfully, didn't happen too often.

If the time ever came when he wasn't winning regularly and building up his bank account enough to make everything worthwhile, maybe he'd hang up his spurs and invest in property

where he could raise good bucking stock. Until then, he'd keep riding and choosing his venues to turn the best profit. That was one of the benefits of belonging to the PRCA. Their organization provided plenty of opportunities all over the country to compete for high stakes.

Ryan sensed a presence behind him and gave the front brim of his Stetson a poke with one finger to raise it so he could look up more easily. It was her! Julie. And she was obviously planning to stay because she was balancing a laden plate of her own.

He smiled and rose as best he could in the confines of the attached bench. "Ma'am. Can I fetch you a drink? The lemonade's real good."

"Yes, please. If you don't mind."

"No problem. Just keep an eye on my food for me. I'll be back in two shakes."

"Of a lamb's tail," Julie added, blushing and averting her gaze. "I raise sheep for their wool."

"So I've heard."

Her head snapped around and she stared at him. "You have?"

"Uh-huh. Stay put. I'll be right back and you can tell me more about it."

It was all Ryan could do to keep from laughing as he turned and headed for the lemonade. Clearly, Julie was used to being disparaged for her choice of livestock. Little wonder, since she lived in cattle country. If his vested interests had been in ranching, he might feel the same. However, because he was only

passing through, it made no difference what kind of damage her flock did to the grazing lands thereabouts. After all, her daddy was a cattleman as well as a local politician. Chances were, he had enough influence to keep Jasper Gulch ranchers from running her out of town on a rail.

Ryan's grin broadened as he made his way back to his table with a plastic cup of cold lemonade. Julie's story was likely to be interesting. And she was certainly easy on the eyes. This promised to be a really nice afternoon. One he was looking forward to.

\* \* \*

If someone had asked Julie how long she'd been sitting there, talking to the fascinating rodeo cowboy, she'd have said it had only been a short time. That was why, when the PA system sounded off, inviting revelers to gather at an old wooden bandstand at the edge of the main picnic area, she was astounded. One glance at her watch confirmed that she'd lost track of time.

"Uh-oh. I'm supposed to be with my family when my father makes his speech."

"About the celebration, you mean?"

"That's part of it. There's also a time capsule buried behind the stage. It was put there during the christening of Jasper Gulch a hundred years ago and everybody's pretty excited about digging it up and seeing what's in it."

"Surely you must already know. I mean, didn't the town's founding fathers write it all down back then?"

Julie shrugged. “Beats me. I suppose they must have, but there’s no telling what happened to that record. A lot of artifacts were ruined back in the fifties when a sprinkler system in city hall malfunctioned and everything in storage molded.”

“What a shame.” Ryan got to his feet and began to gather up their trash. “You go join your family. I’ll take care of this.”

“Nonsense,” she said, reaching for her plate. “I can clean up my own mess.”

“I’m sure you can. But you have somewhere to go and I don’t. I’m in no hurry.”

“Aren’t you riding today?”

“Not until after three. I have plenty of time.” He patted his flat stomach. “I ate too much anyway. Need to go walk some of this off.”

“You said you compete in rough-stock events, right?”

“Yup. Bareback and saddle bronc first, then bulls last, right before the fireworks.”

“I’ll try to be there to watch you.”

“Good. Maybe your good vibes will help me win.”

Pausing, she decided to speak her mind. “I don’t believe in that kind of influence. Skill matters, of course, but I prefer to trust the Lord.”

The expression on his face told her more than she wanted to know, particularly when he said, “Afraid I can’t agree. It’s just as likely that we’re all responsible for our own fate.” He swept his arm in an arc as soon as he’d dropped their refuse in a trash

barrel. “Look at all this. Do you honestly believe a divine Creator is keeping track?”

Hands fisted on her hips, she faced him. “Yes. I do.”

It distressed her to see him shaking his head. “Not me. I used to think it was a possibility once, but I’ve learned different.”

“That is so sad.”

“More than you know,” Ryan mumbled.

He had not been facing her fully when he’d spoken, but she could still make out the words. For all his bravado and flirting and apparent sense of self-worth, he was as lost as one of her lambs in a snowstorm. Her heart went out to him.

Lost is exactly what he is, she concluded.

So treat him kindly and demonstrate God’s love followed as clearly as if her pastor had been standing there, preaching right to her.

Was that why she’d met Ryan Travers? Was she supposed to minister to him? Or was she simply so enamored of this particular man that she was inventing reasons to hang around him? If her former, elderly minister, Pastor Peters, was still around, she could ask him without embarrassment. The new clergyman, Ethan Johnson, was another matter. Not that she didn’t trust him to keep the few confidences she’d already shared. She was simply shy about baring her most intimate thoughts to a person she hardly knew.

Nevertheless, Julie reasoned, there was plenty of scripture that explained how to approach a skeptic. And since Ryan Travers

sounded disillusioned more than unbelieving, she already had a foundation upon which she could build.

Assured, she hurried to join her father and the local dignitaries, who were about to unearth the time capsule. Guesses about what it contained had been floating around town for months. It would be interesting to see how many of them were right. Plus, her dad had invited the press, not to mention a TV crew from Bozeman that was doing a live remote broadcast of the unearthing of the capsule before moving on to cover the rodeo action. This was the biggest party Jasper Gulch had ever hosted, and it promised to make the news all across Montana.

The old bandstand had been repaired and repainted so many times its floor rippled and the stairs leading up to the main stage had depressions worn in the center of each step. Overcome with nostalgia, Julie envisioned a community orchestra playing a waltz and finely dressed couples from just after the turn of the twentieth century dancing on the grass where groups of people now milled around in anticipation.

Julie joined her family in a row of folding chairs onstage. Everybody was there. Her mother, Nadine, was straightening Jackson Shaw's string tie. All three of her brothers, Cord, Austin and Adam, were grouped together, chatting privately while waiting for the speeches to begin.

Faith waved gaily and patted an empty chair. "Over here. I saved you a seat."

Trying to appear unruffled, Julie fought to catch her breath.

“Thanks. I was afraid I’d be late.”

“Oh? Where were you? As if I didn’t know.”

Warmth crept up her neck. Julie knew her cheeks had to be flaming. “I was eating.”

“I saw. How did you manage to displace the barrel racer? She was with the rest of the riders, the way your new friend was supposed to be.”

“I guess Ryan is more of a loner,” Julie said with what she hoped was a nonchalant shrug.

“Didn’t look that alone to me. You two were sure having a long conversation. So spill. What did you learn about him?”

“Um, not a lot. He’s been riding professionally since he was a teenager and specializes in the three rough-stock events.”

“Where does he come from and where does he live when he’s not traveling? Who’s his family? Are his parents living? What’s his ranking so far this year?”

Julie’s jaw dropped. “I didn’t ask.”

“Then what in the world did you find to talk about?”

“Sheep, mostly.”

Faith rolled her eyes. “Well, you can probably cross that cowboy off your list. I can’t imagine anybody being as enamored of fleeces as you are.”

“He seemed interested.”

Cocking her head to gesture without drawing undue attention, Faith indicated a portly, well-dressed businessman mounting the steps to join the people already assembled on the bandstand.

“Wilbur acts that way, too, when he’s trying to impress you.”

“That’s only because he gave up on you. I thought Dad was going to explode when you turned the guy down flat.”

“I do have my moments of lucidity.” Faith giggled. “Poor guy. I know he tries.”

“Who? Dad or Wilbur?” Julie gave the banker the once-over. He had pudgy cheeks to match his expanding girth and so little hair that he’d combed it in a style that made it stick to his forehead as if he thought bystanders would be fooled into thinking he had more hair.

“Definitely poor Wilbur,” Faith said.

“I know. He reminds me of that English teacher we used to have in high school. The one with the nervous tic.”

Faith chuckled. “I remember. And you’re right. Mr. Thompson does kind of resemble him.”

“You do realize, don’t you, that if I keep turning down Wilbur’s social invitations, Dad may decide he’s the right man for you after all? You are older.”

“Perish the thought. I suppose he’ll make a great husband for somebody, but he’s not my type.”

“My sentiments exactly.” Julie brightened. “Hey, maybe you should reconsider. Wilbur might build you a music room if you married him.”

“I’d rather play on a city sidewalk and let people throw coins into my violin case than marry somebody for money. As far as I’m concerned, my music is my life.”

“A violin won’t keep your feet warm in the winter,” Julie teased.

“I suppose you think I should get an Australian shepherd like yours.”

“It beats accepting a man our father has picked out for us. Besides, you could do worse. Cowboy Dan is a great dog.”

Faith was smiling and shaking her head. “You always were a sucker for animals, Julie. You’ve brought home critters ever since you were little. It’s no wonder you like to hang out with sheep and sheepdogs.”

“They accept me just as I am,” Julie countered. “And they never, ever try to guilt me into dating and marriage. What’s not to love about that?”

All Faith said was “Amen, sister,” leaving Julie smiling behind her hand and hoping their father didn’t notice her lack of decorum as he began his speech.

\* \* \*

Ryan chose to meander around the fairgrounds, getting his bearings and greeting old friends from prior rodeos before heading for the bandstand. The mayor’s oratory was not high on his bucket list, nor was he willing to stand around wasting time when he could be sizing up the livestock on which he made his living.

Only one thing drew him to the bandstand. Julie had told him she’d be there, making a command performance, and he wanted to see her again.

Why?

Good question, he asked himself and answered. She wasn't like most of the women he met in his travels. Matter of fact, she was so different, so open and honest, she'd made quite an impression on his jaded attitude about buckle bunnies. That term for the female groupies who frequented rodeos made him smile. He always kept his clothing pure Western and shunned the ornate silver and gold buckles he'd accumulated as prizes, rather than wear them as badges of honor. Every ride was another chance to prove himself to the judges and the fans. It wasn't necessary to brag about his prowess by donning an enormous gaudy oval emblem at his waist.

"Besides," Ryan said aloud, "broncs and bulls don't know the difference or care how many events I've won. They just want to buck me off."

Which was why he should be back at the stock pens taking another look at the caliber of animals he'd draw from later today. And he'd go soon, he promised himself.

Right now, the focus of the crowd seemed to be shifting. People onstage were getting to their feet, and it looked as if Julie was about to accompany the mayor and his delegation to wherever their ancestors had buried the time capsule.

As Ryan observed the area, he noted a black-and-white poster displayed on an easel. It was a fuzzy blowup of an old, damaged sepia photograph. Five men in dark suits, cowboy boots and bowler hats were leaning on shovels and grinning at the camera.

Behind them was the same bandstand that still stood, but the nearby trees were a lot smaller. He judged the wooden box in the foreground to be about two foot square, give or take. At least they knew what the time capsule looked like.

Curious, he followed the procession to a shady area behind the back of the old bandstand. There, the ground was dry and had been trampled by so many feet it would have been impossible to tell exactly where the current digging was going to take place if there had not been a cement marker.

He eased to the side, placed his back against a wooden wall flanking the rear of the stage, folded his arms and waited. He'd abandoned any notion of finding Julie in that milling crowd when he'd seen how difficult it was going to be. Therefore, he'd set himself up so she could locate him. Assuming she wanted to.

Ryan's pulse jumped. Apparently, she did.

A smile began to lift the corners of his mouth and had spread into a wide grin by the time she managed to work her way to him. "Hi," he drawled. "I wondered where you'd gone after you came off the stage."

"I'm supposed to be up front with Dad and the others for a photo op. I'm playing hooky."

"Something tells me you don't like being in the spotlight."

"You're right. I only do it to please my folks, and then not always. I'm here today because I respect my father and want to support him. And Jasper Gulch."

"You've lived here all your life." It wasn't a question.

“Yes. And I plan to stay. It’s more than home, it’s where I have my business and where my family is.” She smiled wistfully. “What about you? Where does your family live?”

“My mother’s in Bozeman.”

“Wonderful. Then you can visit her while you’re in the neighborhood.”

“I suppose.” He deliberately changed the subject and took her elbow. “Come on. Let’s go try to find a place where we can see the time capsule when they bring it up.”

“Okay.”

Julie gave no sign she was surprised by his abrupt action. Good. He didn’t like to talk about his past or what was left of his family. Growing up with an absent father and then losing his only brother in that terrible crash had been bad enough without having to explain to an outsider.

Ryan’s jaw clenched. Even visiting his mother briefly was hard. Seeing her again rekindled all the feelings of loss and anger and guilt he’d borne for so long. He’d never attempt to describe all that to anybody else, of course. Just feeling it himself was painful.

A stump amidst the grove of remaining trees caught Ryan’s attention and he pointed. “That way. Next to that bunch of reporters.”

Julie smiled up at him. “I see what you mean. Think we’ll both fit on the stump?”

“No, but I’ll make sure you don’t fall off,” he promised.

Taking her hand, he helped her step up onto the rough, weathered surface and steadied her. "Can you see now?"

"Yes! They've moved the marker that was on top and have dug almost down to the concrete vault. As soon as they pry up the lid and get the actual box out, the committee will carry it back to the stage and open it in front of everybody."

Watching her pretty face, Ryan noticed her smile fading and a scowl taking the place of her earlier elation. Her hold tightened. She glanced at him, clearly troubled.

"What is it? What's the matter?" he asked.

Julie was acting as if she was in shock. Flashes from cameras blinded everyone.

The TV crew had surged forward and one of them was shoving a microphone on a boom at the dignitaries. Someone was counting backward, "Three, two, one..." preparing to broadcast live.

"We're here in Jasper Gulch for the unearthing of their time capsule and the mayor has just opened the vault!" a female reporter shouted into her microphone as the crowd began to rumble with an undercurrent of disbelief and astonishment. "Get a shot of that hole," the woman yelled aside to her camera crew before returning to her broadcast. "They've just opened the sealed vault, ladies and gentlemen. It's empty!"

Julie saw the reporter gesturing as the spectators pushed in around the site.

She held out her hands to Ryan and he helped her safely step

down from the stump.

“What could you see?” he asked.

“It’s gone,” Julie told him in a hoarse whisper. “The vault is empty. The capsule’s been stolen!”

### Chapter Three

Julie lagged behind with Ryan as the crowd dispersed, following her father and the rest of the centennial committee around to the front of the bandstand. She wanted to look at the empty concrete vault herself, as if needing proof that the time capsule was really missing.

“There’s no way anybody could find clues here now,” Ryan observed. “This dirt has been trampled by too many boots.” He was crouching next to the open hole while curious onlookers slowly passed by, whispering, pointing and conjecturing.

“I know.” Julie was more than disappointed. She was crushed. “What a shame. Opening the capsule was one of our main events. I can’t imagine who would have bothered it.”

Dusting off his hands, Ryan straightened. “One thing you might want to ask yourself is if it was taken recently or pilfered a long time ago.”

“I’d never thought of wondering why the dirt looked freshly disturbed. I just assumed it was loose because somebody had prepared the site for easier digging when the TV cameras were rolling.”

“That’s possible,” he replied with an arch of his dark eyebrows. “It seems likely that the theft occurred after everybody

was reminded that the box existed. The old-timers who buried it in the first place knew what was inside. Folks today probably didn't, unless that rickety old guy I saw you with earlier today was alive back then."

His lazy smile warmed her and temporarily alleviated some of the tension. Julie began to smile again. "Rusty Zidek. He's a fixture around Jasper Gulch. I'll do you a favor and not tell him you just said he was rickety. He's proud of being in his nineties."

"Perfectly understandable," Ryan replied. "If I were his age and still that spry, I'd brag about it, too."

She grew pensive. "You know, even if the original records of the burial of that box have been lost, it's possible Rusty remembers rumors from when he was a boy. It might be worth asking him. I'll suggest it to Dad in case he hasn't already thought of it."

"Okay." Ryan checked his watch. "I hate to miss any of this excitement, but time's getting short. I'd better head over to the arena and see to my bareback riggin'."

"Where do you fall in the schedule?" Julie asked, fully intending to watch him ride every chance she got, as promised.

"I'm fourth up in the bareback lineup, near the last in saddle bronc and the same in bull riding." He grinned. "Guess the officials are saving the best for last."

"Good to see a humble cowboy for a change," Julie quipped.

"Hey, confidence is necessary if I intend to win," Ryan countered. "You can't be unsure of yourself and expect to stick

eight seconds on a buck, especially if it's an eighteen-hundred-pound bull."

She allowed herself to assess him for a few seconds, then said, "The bigger ones are probably a better fit for a guy as tall as you are. I imagine those small bulls are a lot harder to ride."

"Especially if they're slab sided," Ryan explained. "It's like being a contestant in mutton busting when you're a kid."

"That reminds me," Julie said. "I have to see to the sheep I brought to town for that event. The children always look forward to pretending they're big ol' tough cowboys. It's adorable to watch. I just hope my sheep don't have nervous breakdowns."

"What little I know about sheep, it wouldn't take much. They aren't the most intelligent critters in the barn."

She huffed and planted her fists on her hips. "Well, they're smart enough to stay away from wild horses and angry, bucking bulls."

Laughing, he touched the brim of his Stetson. "You've got a point there, ma'am." As he backed away, he gave her a parting grin that made her toes tingle inside her boots.

"I'll pray for you. Okay?" she said.

"Whatever." Turning on his heel, he left her without further comment.

As Julie watched him go, she pondered their previous conversations. Most riders she knew were pretty reliant on the good Lord to watch over them, and many could cite instances when they'd felt God's protection, even if they'd been injured.

Apparently Ryan Travers was a long way from embracing her kind of faith. Julie sighed, disheartened by that conclusion. It was not her habit to try to change folks when they were happy being whoever they'd decided they were, but in Ryan's case she'd make an exception. Denying God's loving kindness and infinite power was bad enough. Doing so when you regularly risked your life was much, much worse.

Julie nodded and smiled at the accurate assessment. And he thought sheep were clueless.

\* \* \*

For the first time in longer than Ryan could recall, he was having trouble keeping his mind on his work. He couldn't have cared less about the missing time capsule; it was pretty Julie Shaw who occupied his thoughts.

"That's not good," he muttered as he stood on a metal rung of the narrow bucking chute and tightened the cinch on the surcingle that was the main part of his bareback rigging. This rangy pinto mare wasn't called Widowmaker for nothing. He knew she followed a pattern around the ring that was not only erratic, she tended to change her tactics if the rider on her back got the least little bit off center.

Off center was exactly what he was, too, Ryan concluded, except his problem was mental. He could not only picture Julie Shaw as if she were standing right there next to the chute gates, he could imagine her light, uplifting laughter.

Actually, he realized with a start, that was what he was

hearing. He started to glance over his shoulder, intending to scan the nearby crowd and, hopefully, locate her.

“Clock’s ticking, Travers,” the chute boss grumbled. “You gonna ride that horse or just look at her?”

Rather than answer with words, Ryan stepped across the top of the chute, wedged one leather-gloved hand into the narrow, rawhide handhold that was his only lifeline while aboard the bronc, folded back his fancy chaps and settled himself as gently as possible.

The horse’s skin twitched. Her ears laid flat. She was gathering herself beneath him, knowing it was nearly time.

Ryan raised his free hand over his head and leaned way back so his spurs would fall at the point of the horse’s shoulder when she took her first jump. Then he nodded to the gate man.

The latch clicked.

The mare leaped.

Ryan held tight, determined to keep his feet in the proper position for a legal mark-out. If he let either heel pull away or drop too low before the mare’s front feet landed that first time, he’d be disqualified. Then it wouldn’t matter how well he rode or how hard this horse bucked. He wouldn’t get a score. Period.

Since half the points awarded were for the rider’s performance and half were for the horse’s, he also wanted her to do well, meaning he had to not only keep his balance, he had to make the proper countermoves to get the most out of this ride. Eight seconds didn’t seem like very long until you had your fingers

wedged into a grip sticky with resin, the horse's hind legs were flying so high you were being flung against her spine and the whiplash made it feel as if your head was fixin' to part company with the rest of you.

Ryan didn't attempt to do anything but ride until he heard the horn blast announcing his success. Then he straightened as best he could and worked his fingers loose with his free hand while pickup men maneuvered their running mounts close enough to help him dismount.

One of the men flicked the flank strap and it dropped away, stopping the mare from trying to kick it loose.

Ryan grabbed the other rider's arm and released his glove while the mare traveled on without them.

"Thanks, man," Ryan said, dropping to the ground next to the pickup horse and getting his balance well enough to scoop up his bent Stetson and dust it off.

"Watch it. Here she comes again," a wrangler warned. "She'd as soon run you down as look at you."

It was immediately clear to Ryan that the man was right. The rangy brown-and-white horse had missed seeing the exit gate on her first pass and was coming around again. Fast and furious.

He leaped up on the nearest fence. To his delight, Julie Shaw and a few others he recognized from before were watching. They had parked a flatbed farm truck near the fence beside the grandstand and were watching from secure perches in its bed.

Julie had both arms raised and was still cheering so wildly she

almost knocked her hat off. “Woo-hoo! Good ride, cowboy!”

Ryan’s “Thanks” was swallowed up in the overall din from the rodeo fans. Clearly, Julie wasn’t the only spectator who had been favorably impressed.

A loudspeaker announced his score as eighty-six and a quarter.

Julie cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, “You were robbed!” which made him smile even more broadly.

He knew he should immediately report to the area behind the strip chutes and pick up his rigging. And he would. In a few minutes. As soon as he’d spoken to his newest fan.

The soles of his feet prickled in his boots as he jumped off the outside of the fence and reached behind to loosen the thigh buckles on his chaps.

“I’ll take any decent score I can get,” he said, wanting to reassure her that he wasn’t upset about her hometown event. “When I’m going for all-around in rough stock, every completed ride is a good one.”

She climbed down to join him and lightly touched his arm before facing the people she was with. “Ryan Travers, this is my sister, Faith. You probably noticed her at the parade. And this is Hannah Douglas, one of my very best friends. The adorable twins are hers. The boy is Corey and the girl is Chrissy.”

Ryan tipped his hat. “My pleasure. I think I met Mrs. Douglas at city hall when I checked in as a competitor.”

“That’s right,” the dark-haired, dark-eyed young woman said.

She laughed lightly. “At least I think we met. I’ve seen so many strange cowboys lately they’re all starting to look alike.”

“Not to Julie, they don’t,” Faith chimed in.

Ryan almost laughed aloud when he saw Julie shoot a look of disdain at her sister. She was even cuter when she was blushing, and she was certainly pink enough now. So much so that the contrast of her freckles had almost vanished.

“Want to come with me to claim my rigging?” Ryan asked, assuming everyone would know which woman he was asking.

When all three answered in the affirmative, his jaw dropped—until the other two began to laugh and he realized he’d been the brunt of their inside joke.

“No way,” Julie announced boldly. “This one is all mine.” And with that, she took Ryan’s arm and urged him to walk away with her.

He was unsure how to best respond until she abruptly released her hold and apologized. “Sorry. I’m not usually so pushy. My sister knows how to get my goat, but Hannah doesn’t often help her.”

“It must be nice to be so close.”

“Yes. You don’t have siblings?”

Although he tried to mask his feelings, there was apparently enough poignancy in his expression to cause her smile to fade when he said, “No. Not anymore.”

She didn’t ask further questions, nor did she offer unasked-for advice. She simply slipped her hand through the crook of his

elbow again and tightened her grip.

If Ryan had been asked to interpret her actions at that moment, he probably would have said she was offering moral support. That was certainly the impression he was getting. And, like it or not, her presence was helping him handle the guilt and sorrow he still carried in regard to losing his big brother, Kirk.

Pushing aside those disturbing memories with Herculean effort, Ryan placed his other hand over Julie's and kept walking. If he could have done so without attracting undue attention, he would have kept her by his side indefinitely.

There was something very special about Julie Shaw. Something he could not explain. Something intrinsic that emanated from her as if she were the personification of acceptance. And of love.

Caught unaware by that random thought, Ryan almost pulled away from her. Yet, he didn't. And the why and wherefore of that choice troubled him deeply.

\* \* \*

Julie yearned to urge Ryan to confide in her more. To let her help heal his obvious emotional pain. If he would tell her about his problems, she might know better how to pray for him.

"As if God needs my input," she muttered as she left him checking his bronc-riding gear for his next event and headed back to rejoin Faith and Hannah. True, scripture urged praying without ceasing, yet she also knew there were references to God knowing what His children needed before they even asked. In the

case of that spiritual truth, and others, Julie didn't mind admitting she was confused.

Besides, she thought, climbing back aboard the truck bed with her friends and adjusting her straw Western hat, Ryan had made it clear that he did not share her Christian beliefs. That was even sadder than the way he was apparently mishandling his grief. Life without faith had to be much harder, losses more difficult to accept.

It was always sad when a person suffered. It was doubly devastating to see someone trying to cope without the Savior to lean on. Temporal friends could offer only so much comfort. Jesus would be there to help no matter what the circumstances, but only if He was invited.

This could be a pride problem, she reasoned, particularly in the case of a man like Ryan Travers. He was used to doing things his way, relying on his own strength. And, unfortunately, it looked as if he had failed to overcome whatever trauma had led to his no longer having any siblings. Oh, he probably thought he'd gotten over the loss, but he hadn't. Not even close. Was that what drove him to stay on the road most of the year? Julie wondered. Perhaps. And perhaps he didn't even realize why he was so restless.

Or maybe all this is a figment of my imagination because I don't want to admit he's happy traveling all the time, she countered. Just because she was a homebody and content to have deep, strong roots didn't mean that a person who preferred to

move around had to be unhappy.

She sighed and released her angst. It didn't matter why Ryan competed all over the country. He was who and what he wanted to be, regardless of his motivation.

Meaning they were totally incompatible, she concluded in spite of mental arguments to the contrary. Yes, he was appealing. And yes, she really liked him. But getting too attached to him would be a big, big mistake. One she was determined not to make.

#### Chapter Four

Ryan had not intended to hang around behind the scenes when the mutton busting was introduced as part of the afternoon's entertainment. He simply had little else to occupy him while the bareback horses were removed and saddle broncs loaded into the holding pens directly behind the chutes. Stock contractors had their own wranglers and treated those horses better than a lot of folks treated their kin, meaning they didn't want them touched by anybody else.

He got himself a bottle of cold water and drank it as he ambled over to the place where a passel of youngsters was gathered. A twenty-something man he recognized from the mayor's entourage was instructing the kids about safety, so Ryan figured he was probably one of Julie's brothers.

Some of the little boys and girls looked overconfident, while others seemed scared to death. It was those children who tugged at Ryan's heart and caused him to edge closer.

He spotted one boy who seemed far too small and timid to be competing, and crouched down to speak with him. “Hi, there. Where’s your mama? Does she know you’re planning to try to ride a sheep?”

Although his lower lip was trembling, the little boy stuck out his chin and ignored the question.

“A grown-up has to fill out paperwork for you, buddy. You can’t enter without your mama or daddy being here.”

Tears welled in the child’s eyes as he looked around. “Mama’s here.”

“Where?”

“I—I lost her.”

Straightening, Ryan offered his hand. “Okay. Why don’t you come with me and I’ll introduce you to the lady who owns the sheep while we wait around for your mother to come looking for you. Then, in a few years when you’re older, maybe you’ll be all ready to ride like the bigger kids.”

“Uh-uh. Can’t go with strangers. Mama said.”

“And your mama is absolutely right,” Ryan assured him. “But since she’s bound to look for you where she saw you last, I think it would be okay to hang around and talk to the sheep lady for a bit. Her name is Julie. See? She’s right over there. The pretty one with the dark red hair and the straw Stetson.”

Smiling, he followed the little boy’s tentative steps as they skirted the group of excited children and approached Julie. The moment she looked up, he tipped his hat and eyed the boy. “My

friend and I were wondering if we could maybe give you a hand. He wants to ride, but his mama got herself lost, so she isn't here to sign for him. Would you mind if he petted your sheep?"

The grin Julie returned rested on him first, widened, then switched to settle on the uneasy child. "Of course not. They're pretty tame, particularly around me. I'm afraid I've made pets of them."

"Hey, as long as you're raising them for their wool, no problem, right?" Ryan offered.

"Right." Julie held out an arm. "Would you like to come in here with me or do you want to stay outside with your cowboy friend?"

The boy seemed to be considering carefully before he reached for Ryan's hand and grasped it firmly. "Stay here." His upturned face searched Ryan's. "Okay, mister?"

"Fine with me."

Ryan swallowed past a lump in his throat. He wasn't sure what touched him more, the boy's trust or the gentle expression on Julie's face when she looked at them standing there together. Here he was, a tough-as-nails guy who faced fifteen-hundred-pound-plus belligerent farm animals, and he'd been reduced almost to tears by a small boy and a pretty woman. If his old friends could see him now, they'd probably laugh their spurs off.

And he didn't care, he suddenly realized. At this time, in this situation, he was so at peace, so filled with joy, he truly didn't care what anybody else thought.

That's not entirely true, Ryan mused. He did care about one person. And she was bestowing the loveliest, most warm and wonderful smile he'd ever had the pleasure to receive.

If he'd been the romantic type, he might even have said it made his heart sing.

\* \* \*

Julie saw plenty of happy families all around her, yet had eyes only for the stalwart cowboy and the trusting little boy. There was something endearing about them, not that she hadn't seen plenty of fathers and sons together before.

She turned back to her tasks with the sheep, but her mind continued to dwell on Ryan. Perhaps the sight of him befriending the boy seemed so wonderful because he had told her he was close to no one, had no family other than his mother, whom he rarely saw. It was almost as if Julie was being given a glimpse of the kind of father he could someday become.

"Are those girls or boys?" Ryan's young friend asked.

"These are all girls. Mama sheep are called ewes," Julie replied. "I brought these to the rodeo because they're so friendly."

"I know horses can live twenty years or more," Ryan said. "How old are these animals?"

Julie chuckled. "Be careful you don't hurt their feelings. They might take offense if they knew you'd called them old."

"Sorry. It's hard to tell."

"It can be unless you're used to judging sheep. These are about eight. As long as I have the room and plenty of feed, they'll live

out their natural lives in my flock.”

“Not a very practical approach to ranching,” the cowboy said.

“Yes and no. Business is good and they still produce fine wool. Sales have really taken off since I updated my website. I’ve had to hire more help for lambing and shearing.”

Whatever happened, Julie was determined to keep her hands on every aspect of Warm and Fuzzy. The name of her business went back to her days as a youngster in 4-H, and it always made her smile. So did being in the company of gentle ewes and their lambs. Adult rams were another story. She never turned her back on them, even in the off-season.

“I can’t figure out the look of that wool,” Ryan said. “It’s almost silky.”

“That’s because I specialize in Leicester Longwools.”

“Lesters? Like in Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, the bluegrass pickers?”

Julie chuckled. “It’s pronounced Lester but spelled L-e-i-c-e-s-t-e-r. They’re rare but have amazing fleeces.”

“They certainly do. Not that I’ve paid a lot of attention before. I guess you can tell I’m used to hanging around horses and cattle.”

The young man helping her offered his hand to Ryan. “Me, too, but I got roped into this. I’m Adam, Little Bo Peep’s brother.”

The men shook hands.

“You’re forgiven—but Adam isn’t,” Julie said with a mock scowl. She shoed him back to work and returned to her

interrupted conversation with Ryan.

“The Jasper Gulch Chamber of Commerce and Event Committee thanks you and all your fellow competitors for being here,” Julie said formally.

“I’d rather you thanked me personally,” Ryan said “Will you be free tonight during the fireworks show?”

“I’d planned to watch with my family. There are a lot of us, and we usually make a party out of it.” Hesitating, she finally added, “If you want to join us, you’ll be most welcome.”

“Thanks. Where will you be?”

“On the old bridge over Beaver Creek. It’s one of the reasons we decided to hold such a long celebration instead of just remembering the town’s actual founding date. We’re trying to raise money to repair the picturesque sites like that bridge and encourage tourism. Being so close to Yellowstone Park, we think we’ll have a fair chance of success, particularly if we can add a scenic route to the option of driving through Jasper Gulch instead of going around it on the highway.”

“I guess that makes sense for folks who have the time to just look at scenery. I’m always in a hurry or driving at night to make the next competition.”

Julie straightened and shook her head as she gazed at him and said, “That’s sad.”

“Not to me, it isn’t. I happen to like my life on the road.”

What could she do but smile? “Then more power to you. There are too many people who never decide what they want to do or

who they want to be. One day they wake up and realize it's too late for them."

She checked her watch. "Speaking of late, I need to get these ewes lined out so the kids can start."

"Go right ahead. We'll just watch. Right, buddy?"

The child tugged on his hand. "There's my mama!"

"Then you'd better go tell her where you are so she doesn't worry."

"Yeah!"

Julie paused as soon as she'd guided the first two ewes into the narrow passageway to the makeshift chutes the kids were using.

"That was sweet of you."

"What was?"

"Looking after that little boy until his mother found him. She must have been worried sick."

Ryan shrugged. "Maybe. I didn't do it for her. She should have kept better track of him."

"I'm sure she tried."

"Maybe."

Watching his changing expressions, Julie wondered why the mention of a mother's care and concern seemed to bother him so much. Was that why he'd been so noncommittal when she'd asked if he intended to visit his own mother? Perhaps. Then again, maybe he was simply the kind of adult who looked out for the welfare of children.

And damsels in distress, she added silently, stifling a telling

grin. There was no way she'd ever qualify as a damsel, in distress or otherwise. Given her ability to take care of herself beautifully, as well as running a ranching and internet business, she knew she wasn't the type of woman who brought out a man's protective instincts.

"Well, thanks anyway, on behalf of Jasper Gulch," Julie said pleasantly. "This is a safe little town when we're not entertaining so many visitors. Dad hired extra sheriff's men to help the regular deputy, Cal Calloway, patrol during our special events. Truth to tell, a few men in uniform would never be able to handle all the problems that might arise if we didn't look after one another the way we always do."

"I'm sure your old friend Rusty would be glad to strap on a six-shooter and help," Ryan teased.

He was trying to lighten the mood, Julie decided. And to distract her from the way his persona had hardened in defense of the child. This cowboy was a complex person, one who chose to keep his true emotions in check and present himself as a carefree drifter. He was not. She might hardly know him, but she could tell that already.

The true puzzle was not what he did for a living, it was why. Lots of young men rode well and could have competed the way Ryan did, yet most chose to stay home and use their skills on family ranches. This talented rider insisted he was proud of having no roots, of being totally free.

But he was not free, she concluded. Far from it. He was

bearing a burden in his heart that she had only glimpsed. In the days to come, while the rodeo continued, she planned to find out more. To try to understand his motivation for breaking old ties and not forming new ones.

And in the meantime, she would do the only thing she could. She would pray for him and wait for the Lord's guidance.

\* \* \*

Ryan stood at the fence for a few minutes to watch the kids hanging on to the ewes' fleece while the fractious sheep raced across the arena. There was no riding gear other than helmets for each child to wear, so they had to grab fists full of wool and just hope their feet didn't slide too far to one side. Most ended up in the dirt in one or two seconds and half were crying when they were helped to stand, despite the applause from onlookers.

He'd never had the privilege of competing like this. If his big brother hadn't taken him under his wing and taught him to ride, he might never have discovered how good he was or how much he loved rodeo. That was before Kirk had gotten involved with a bad crowd and started leaving him home to go out drinking; before he'd climbed behind the wheel of a car and died in a wreck blamed on drunk driving.

I should have told on him. Only I didn't, did I? Ryan mused. Not that it would have made any difference. Their mother was always too busy working to pay much attention to her sons.

Ryan would probably have dropped out of high school if it had not been for the rodeo team and its coach. By the time he

graduated, he was already winning local prizes. After that, it was just a matter of getting his seasoning on the road and finding his niche. He'd traveled with a couple of buddies until he'd saved up enough to buy a nice truck and strike out on his own. Now he preferred to go it alone. It was better that way. There were no scheduling conflicts to resolve and nobody minded if he won steadily, outearned his rivals and kept growing his bank account.

The first saddle broncs were already waiting in the chutes by the time he worked his way around the arena. Mutton busting was over and the winners were proudly waving their blue ribbons while the clown-face-painted bullfighters held them up to the accolades of the crowd.

Ryan spotted Bobbi Jo in the distance and raised a hand to wave. She responded with a smile and started toward him. She wasn't his type, but she was a faithful friend, one who was always willing to loan him one of her spare horses if he needed a mount for the grand entry or, like today, for a parade. The fact that she had a small fortune invested in her horses made her generosity even more out of the ordinary.

"Need help pinning your number on?" she asked.

"No, I've got it. I took the vest off and did it myself."

"Humph. I'd have thought you'd recruit your new girlfriend to do the honors."

"She's not my girlfriend. I barely know her."

"Give it a week or so," the pretty barrel racer said. "Then tell me you aren't interested in her."

“Not gonna happen,” Ryan insisted. “Julie’s roots are deep here. There’s no way she’d pull up stakes and follow me all over the country.”

“Why not? I do.”

“You’re not here because I am,” Ryan said flatly. “You’re here because this is the best prize money for time spent and you know it.” He purposely changed the subject. “I understand your practice runs were very good.”

“Not as good as they’ll have to be to beat the others. That older woman from Oklahoma is a racing fool. And her horse is part Arabian, so he never gets tired.”

“You’ll do fine,” Ryan assured her. “Just don’t knock over a barrel and pick up penalties.”

“Oh, sure. Like all you have to do is keep from getting bucked off and you’ll win, too.”

“It’s a start.” He chuckled. “I’ll try to watch your run while they’re getting the bulls moved up.”

“Thanks.”

As he left his friend, Ryan recalled how Julie had promised to pray for his success. It must be nice to believe in God so strongly that she could rely on the power of prayer rather than skill.

He had no such delusions. He was in the competition because he was good at what he did. That was all there was to it. And until he was either incapacitated or got too old to compete well, he was going to keep going. Keep traveling. Keep striving to be the best in the business and take home the biggest purses. Lack of

interest in roping might keep him from ever winning all-around titles like Ty Murray had, but his riding would keep him in the spotlight, hopefully for years to come.

There was nothing more he could ask. Nothing else he wanted out of life, at least for the present.

In the back of his mind, a thought that was barely there asked, Really?

## Chapter Five

If the afternoon had been a bit cooler, Julie might have left her ewes at the rodeo grounds until the end of the day. The humidity was low, but once the daytime temps reached into the mid-eighties she decided to ask her youngest brother, Adam, to haul them home for her.

She rode along. “So what did you think when the time capsule turned up missing?”

He shrugged. “Beats me. Dad was sure steamed.”

“At least he kept his cool and got the crowd to move away from the site. I don’t suppose the sheriff’s officers we had patrolling the grounds came prepared to investigate a crime like that.”

“Not when Cal and the extra deputies were hired just for crowd control,” Adam replied. “There’s a forensics team coming in from Bozeman, but I don’t expect them to find anything.”

“I agree.” Julie was nodding thoughtfully. “Ryan asked if the theft might have occurred a long time ago.”

“Ryan? The guy I met by the sheep?”

“Yes. He’s one of the rough-stock cowboys. I met him this

morning and we seemed to hit it off really well.”

Her brother chuckled. “I want to be there when Dad finds out you’re interested in a rodeo rider.”

“Why, because you plan to defend my right to pick my own husband?” She had to laugh at the irony. “Give me a break. You have enough trouble keeping the girls at bay with him and Mom shoving them at you. The way I see it, since you, Cord and Austin are all older than Faith and I, you guys should get married and settle down first.”

“Life doesn’t work that way, baby sister. When it’s time for me to find a wife, I fully expect her to fall into my lap, not show up because our folks have been matchmaking.”

“Well said.” Julie relaxed, leaned back and sighed. If she allowed herself to accept her brother’s reasoning, she might actually start to believe she’d met Ryan Travers because he was the one for her. Was that possible?

Not rationally, she argued inwardly. She did enjoy his company, but that didn’t mean there was any deeper meaning to their meeting. Or to the fact that they seemed very compatible in many areas. Given her aversion to city slickers like Wilbur, however, she saw no reason to shun the amiable, good-looking cowboy. As long as Ryan was in town, she could enjoy his company and perhaps discourage her father’s matchmaking, if only for two or three weeks.

She would never lead a man on, of course, which meant she would have to tell Ryan all about her dad and why she was

unwilling to heed his wishes. A smile slowly lifted the corners of her mouth. It could actually be fun to pretend the handsome rider was her boyfriend, particularly if he was in on the ruse and knew all about her father's crazy efforts to get all his kids married off and settled on nearby ranches of their own.

Tonight, at the fireworks show, she would set up the amusing scenario. Talk about fireworks!

If Ryan shows up, she added silently.

He will. Julie was positive. And since she was going to be back on the ranch soon, she'd freshen up before returning to town for the evening festivities.

Especially the bull riding. She couldn't miss that. She'd promised Ryan she'd be there for as many of his rides as possible, and she intended to keep her word.

A warmth infused her cheeks as the reality of the situation grew clearer. Hers was more than a simple friendly promise. She truly wanted to be present to watch him ride. And to pray for his safety when the chute gate opened and he spent the next eight seconds, and beyond, in mortal danger.

Closing her eyes as her brother drove toward home, Julie began her prayers for Ryan's safety then and there.

\* \* \*

He'd come in third in the first round of saddle-bronc riding and had hit the ground right in front of one of the TV cameras, so his landing was liable to wind up on the late news. This ride hadn't earned the best score he'd ever been awarded, but it wasn't

the worst either, and there were more chances coming in the ensuing days. They'd eliminate some of the less able riders this first weekend, add some special former champions the second, then tie up the titles and grand prize money during the third and final series of events. All he had to do was see that he landed in the top ten this weekend, then wait for the next chance and the next and do the same.

By the time it was all over, he expected to have lined his pockets with plenty of money and maybe come away with a new hand-tooled saddle and bridle, a pair of silver spurs and a couple of fancy buckles, too.

Barnyard aromas permeated the air. Dust rose in clouds as the livestock was shifted from place to place by expert wranglers. The sun overhead beat down on men and animals alike.

Ryan mopped his brow and donned a protective vest. He'd seen his first bull perform before, so he wasn't going into this ride blind. He squared his hat on his head tightly and scaled the fence to prepare to step aboard.

One last look at the cowboys and groupies gathered behind the chutes was all it took to make him smile and hesitate. Julie was back!

She waved her arm wildly and grinned. "Hi!"

Acknowledging her with a nod, Ryan stood astride the chute fences, holding his weight off the animal while friends pulled his rigging tight for him and he rubbed his rosined gloves along the braided poly-and-manila rope. He slipped his glove through the

handhold, laid the braid across his palm and took his wrap. Then he pounded his stiff fingers tighter with his free hand and eased himself down onto the bull's back.

This brindle had a hump like a Brahma cross and horns big enough to reach out and touch a guy if he wasn't careful.

Ryan pulled his feet off the rails. Nodded to signal the gate man. Held his breath. Raised his free hand over his head and tensed, ready for anything—he hoped.

The bull turned toward the arena, leaped into the air, landed stiff legged and was airborne again before even one second had passed.

There was no way to calculate the time or plan ahead. All Ryan could do was keep his balance, bend at the hips to stay out over the shoulders of the snorting, slobbering, lurching animal and hang on.

The crowd went wild, screeches, hoots and cheers buoying him up.

Focused so intently on the bull, Ryan barely heard anything beyond the animal's growls and the roar of the spectators in the stands.

\* \* \*

Julie was perched on the top rung of the arena fence, shouting, "Go, go, go! Yes!"

An air horn sounded. The eight seconds were up. He'd made it!

"Yay!" Her heart was already pounding from the excitement

when she saw Ryan reaching for his rope to loosen it.

“Oh, no! His balance is off,” she yelled to nobody in particular. He was slipping to one side. And the bull was still bucking just as hard as it had before.

Julie gasped and held her breath. The crowd reacted the same way. The din behind her changed to a more muted reverberation. Tension was palpable.

Bullfighters in clown makeup and baggy clothes dashed into the fray. One headed straight for the bull, reaching out as if planning to touch its forehead between the curved horns.

Ryan finally pulled his hand free. He leaped, landing in the dirt and rolling aside, barely escaping the pounding cloven hoofs of the immense animal.

Julie screamed. Men were shouting.

Ryan clambered to his feet, raised his arms over his head and bounced on his toes like a prizefighter after scoring a knockout.

She caught his eye almost immediately and watched his elated grin broaden even more. By the time he'd scooped up his hat and been handed his discarded rigging, he was almost to the fence where she'd been waiting.

“Great ride!”

He beamed. “Thanks.”

“Lousy dismount, though. I thought you were a goner for sure.”

“Nah, he missed me by a mile.”

“Try a few inches. Why don't you at least wear a helmet like

so many of the other riders do?”

“Can’t see well enough through the face mask,” Ryan replied. “Besides, it throws off my balance.”

“It’s still better than getting your head stomped flat. Do you have any idea how close you came just now?”

“He missed, didn’t he?” One eyebrow arched. “Well?”

She gave him an exaggerated pouting look. “Yes. This time he did. What about the next time? Or the time after that?”

“Worried? Careful, or folks will think you care.”

“I do.”

“What about all that talk of praying for me?”

“I did. I was. But that doesn’t mean you can’t still get hurt.”

“Then why bother?”

Although he seemed nonchalant and carefree about it, Julie sensed an underlying sense of seriousness, as if he wanted an honest answer.

“Sometimes I wonder about that myself,” she confessed. “But I keep in mind that the Bible says to pray without ceasing and to ask for anything we want.”

“Sounds like a kid writing to Santa.”

Sobering, she shook her head. “Not at all. It’s a connection with our faith, with God and Jesus, that helps me all the time, no matter what answers I get.”

“Really?”

His arched eyebrows and evident skepticism were disturbing but not enough to dissuade her. “Yes, really. As a believer, if I

trust God to do what's best for me and try to listen and stay in His will, then I'll know what to pray for and He'll help me achieve it.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” Forcing a smile, she looped her hand around his elbow and fell into step beside him. “I know where they stashed the leftovers from the picnic. Are you hungry now that your rides are over for the day?”

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