



SUPER ROMANCE

A man and a woman are walking away from the camera in a field, holding hands. The man is wearing a blue denim shirt and jeans. The woman is wearing a white tank top, blue jeans, and black boots. A horse's head is visible on the right side of the frame. The background is a blurred landscape with hills and trees under a clear blue sky.

To Kiss a Cowgirl

JEANNIE WATT

Jeannie Watt

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«HarperCollins»

Watt J.

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Their rivalry isn't new...but their attraction is! Wild spirit Jolie Brody never dreamed her new boss at the ranch supply store would be Dylan Culver. They haven't seen each other since high school, but he's just as straitlaced as ever. Good thing it's only temporary; Mr. Uptight is in town nursing an injury before he goes back to law enforcement. As they work together—surprisingly well—they can't deny their attraction. Letting a kiss lead to love is a commitment Jolie has never had to risk. So why is she now flirting with the possibility of a future with Dylan...a man with a dangerous job that makes everything complicated?

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Welcome to Lightning Creek Ranch, nestled in the foothills of Montana's majestic Bitterroot Mountains, home to the strong-willed Brody family. Life isn't always easy on the Lightning Creek, but challenges are nothing new to the men and women who live and work here.

And there's something about the ranch, something in the beauty and solitude that works a kind of magic on those in need of a second shot at life...

Dear Reader,

I just love a good enemies-to-lovers story, so when I wrote the second book of The Brodys of Lightning Creek, I decided to have Jolie Brody meet up with Dylan Culver, a guy she drove crazy in high school—and not in a good way. Jolie is the youngest of the four Brody sisters and the most carefree, but beneath her easygoing exterior she is dealing with issues stemming from her father's untimely death—issues she doesn't fully acknowledge until she starts to fall for Dylan.

When police officer Dylan Culver returns to Montana to run the family ranch supply store while he heals from a duty-related accident, he is stunned to find his former nemesis, Jolie Brody, managing the store. He's even more stunned to find himself attracted to her. Jolie soon makes it clear that she will never ever get involved with someone who has a dangerous job, and that's a problem, because Dylan loves his job and he just might be falling in love with Jolie, too.

I hope you enjoy reading To Kiss a Cowgirl. I certainly enjoyed writing it. For more information about my books, including more The Brodys of Lightning Creek reads, please check out my website, www.jeanniewatt.com.

Happy reading!

Jeannie Watt

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

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

DYLAN CULVER MANEUVERED his beat-up Chevy truck between the stacks of hay and straw behind the family feed store and parked in his old spot next to the grain shed. He'd never in a million years thought he'd be back in Montana, back at the store. Back at the place his dad had worked so hard to keep him away from.

At least it was temporary. Four months until his cousin Finn returned from his National Guard deployment. Four months to focus on something other than the aftermath of his failed marriage or the accident that had put him on desk duty. By the time Finn took over the reins again, Dylan would be fully healed and ready to get the hell out of Dodge.

Okay...he was ready now, but he'd promised Finn he'd take care of Mike, their grandfather, and the store and that was exactly what he was going to do. The unsettled business he'd left in Washington State could wait.

Grabbing his granddad's dented metal lunch pail from the seat beside him, he opened the door and stepped out into the driving rain. Unlike the grain shed siding, which was now flapping in the wind, the tarps covering the hay seemed to be secure. Good, because he couldn't afford having hay returned due to mold.

In fact, after looking over the profit-and-loss sheets Finn had left with Mike, he was glad he'd become used to living frugally over the past couple months. Not that Finn hadn't done a decent job running the place, but with two chain ranch stores opening up within easy driving distance, they'd lost clientele—and employees. Their longtime cashier had left to go to work for Western World, and their bookkeeper had recently retired. Now with Finn deployed and his grandfather recovering from hip surgery and about to move into a smaller house, Dylan and the new bookkeeper had some challenges ahead of them.

Bowing his head against the rain, he started to jog as he rounded the corner to the main entrance, gritting his teeth against the residual pain in his injured leg. The lights were on inside the old building but the door held fast when he pulled on the handle. He reached into his pocket for his keys, but the door swung open before his fingers touched metal. “Thanks,” he said, stepping inside and shaking the rain off before glancing at the woman who stood there.

“Jolie?” He had the odd sensation of his blood freezing. Perhaps one of the warning signs of a heart attack?

“Hi, Dylan.” Her voice was still husky, her hair still long and reddish blond, her eyes the greenest he’d ever seen. “Long time.”

Not long enough.

When Finn had said he’d hired an assistant to help with the store, Dylan had somehow assumed he’d hired someone Dylan could work with. Well, now he knew why his cousin had been shiftier about the new hire. What in the hell had Finn been thinking? And, yes, he definitely felt a strong squeezing sensation in the middle of his chest.

“You’re dripping,” Jolie said, interrupting his heart attack.

Dylan glanced down. There was water falling from the brim of his ball cap onto the floor near his boots. He pulled off the hat, gave it a shake. When he looked up, she was regarding him with an ironic half smile.

“You didn’t know I worked for you, did you?”

“No.” Dylan moved forward to set the lunch pail on the counter, trying not to notice that she looked even better than she had back in high school when she’d made his life miserable by not taking anything seriously. That wouldn’t have bothered him if she hadn’t been his chemistry partner for the year and if he hadn’t needed a strong A to sew up some much-needed scholarships.

“I moved back to the Lightning Creek about six weeks ago.” She leaned an elbow on the tall counter next to him, looking relaxed, as she always had during situations that’d sent his blood pressure skyrocketing. After nearly a decade of being a patrol cop, his blood pressure rarely triggered anymore...except, obviously, when he discovered that his nemesis was his employee. “This was the only job I could get close to home,” she continued.

He noticed that while she’d sounded cool and confident, she was watching him carefully.

“Imagine that,” Dylan said.

“It isn’t because I’m unemployable,” she said smoothly. “It’s because it’s the end of winter and no one is hiring.”

“Except Finn.” Bless his black heart.

“I might have reeled in a favor,” Jolie said, and even though she spoke matter-of-factly, Dylan didn’t want to know what kind of favor. “I needed the job and, frankly, I think this place needs someone like me.”

“This place needs you?” She looked about as out of place there—with her form-fitting, blinged-out white shirt tied at the waist and short denim skirt—as a rosebush in a hay field. Easy on the eyes, but somehow didn’t belong.

“Look at it,” Jolie said, making a sweeping gesture. “Dark, depressing.” She ran a finger over the counter next to her. “Dusty.”

“It’s a feed and seed store,” he said as if she were dense, which he knew she wasn’t.

“A depressing feed store. Why would anyone come here—”

“To buy feed?”

“—when they could go to a more modern place and get the same thing and a whole lot more?”

“Because we’re a local institution.”

“That would be the only reason as far as I can see. Your prices are barely competitive.”

“Well, maybe if you took a job elsewhere you wouldn’t have to be stuck in this dark, depressing...” He paused, trying to recall the third D she’d mentioned in her unsolicited critique.

"Dusty," she supplied. "And at the moment, I don't want a job elsewhere."

"Why not? Surely your talents could be better used in a less dusty environment."

"The employee discount. I buy a lot of feed."

"And you can't get a job anywhere else?"

"I could if I wanted to travel. I don't." She sauntered a step closer, her full lips curving into a half smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I can get something else when the market opens up. I have experience." She said the word in a way that sent his imagination shooting into areas it probably shouldn't travel, even if that hadn't been her intention. He yanked it back to where it was supposed to be. When had he ever reacted like that to Jolie Brody?

"However, the market is tight. I now have a job close to home and I'm sticking with it." Her smile became a touch warmer. "I promised Finn."

He and Finn were going to have a talk as soon as he could get him on the phone.

The bell rang over the front door and Morley Ames walked in, kind of. The old guy, a close friend of his grandfather's, was stooped over and skinnier than the last time he'd seen him, but his voice was just as booming as ever as he hailed Dylan.

Jolie smiled at Dylan and went behind the counter where she'd apparently been cleaning, since she quickly moved a bottle of spray cleaner out of sight.

"Morley," Dylan said, moving forward to shake the man's hand. "Good to see you."

"So it's true—you've given up law enforcement and moved home. I didn't believe it when Gina told me at the café."

"I'm just on leave," Dylan said, noting that Jolie gave him a quick, curious glance before settling herself in front of the computer. "I thought I'd come here to escape all the rain," he said with a smile, indicating the puddle that was forming around Morley's feet as water dripped off his black hat and raincoat.

The old man looked up at him with an appreciative smile. "We all need a change sometimes," he said.

"Can I help you with something?" Dylan asked before Morley launched into personal questions he'd have to deflect.

Morley pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it, squinting through his fogged glasses as he read, "Hen scratch. Rolled oats—two bags. Salt block—"

"Do you want minerals in that?" Jolie asked as she came to stand next to the old man, cocking her head to see his list. He beamed and handed it to her. She took it gently and squinted a little herself at the light-penciled script on the sheet of pale blue paper. "Lillian wrote this, didn't she?"

"Woman can't put pressure on a pencil," Morley muttered. "Arthritis."

"I have something for her," Jolie said. "A special cream that just came in. I'll see if I can find a sample while Dylan loads your truck." She handed Dylan the paper.

Way to give orders, Jolie.

Dylan frowned as he took the list, suddenly understanding why they were both squinting. It was as if Morley's wife had written in faint code. "Do you need this to write the ticket?" he asked Jolie, hoping she would decode it for him.

"Nope. I got it. Hen scratch, twenty-five pounds. Two fifty-pound bags of rolled oats. One salt block—"

"No minerals," Morley added.

"No minerals," she repeated with a smile. "Three ivermectin, bag balm and a fly spray." Jolie reached out to gently take Morley's hand in hers, examining it. "Are you using bag balm for your hands?"

"Yeah." Chapped and cracked hands were a mainstay of ranching life, particularly in winter. The ointment used to heal milk cows' chapped utters was the go-to remedy.

"It works," Jolie said. "But I have something else you could try...if you wanted."

“Will it make me smell like a whorehouse?”

“Unscented,” Jolie said. “And it doesn’t stay greasy like bag balm, so the hay and dirt won’t stick to your hands.”

“Throw it in. Maybe Lillian will like it.”

Dylan loaded the truck and then came back inside the store as Morley drove away. “Are you in some kind of hand cream business?”

“What if I am?”

“I guess my question is more along the lines of should you be hawking your wares in my store?”

“I’m not selling the stuff,” Jolie said. “I gave him samples.”

“Am I selling the stuff?”

“You could be.”

“I don’t think so.”

Jolie gave him a long look and he had the impression that he’d reacted exactly as she’d expected him to.

“If you diversify a little, or try some new sales gimmicks, you might bring in more customers.”

“Our customers come here to buy feed, and I’m not into gimmicks.” Thinking that he needed to get out of there, Dylan grabbed his lunch pail and headed for his cousin’s—now his—private office. His father, uncle and grandfather had always subscribed to the theory that you stocked what the majority of your customers needed. Money spent on inventory that took forever to sell was money that could be in the bank, drawing interest. He may not have anticipated a future in business, but he did recall that particular facet of the sales game being discussed often and at length as the brothers debated what merchandise to carry beyond feed and seed.

Mike had even repeated his business theory a few times that morning before Dylan left for work, as if Dylan were going to start ordering useless items as soon as he got close to a computer.

He closed the door and stood for a moment, shoving thoughts of Jolie aside as he took in the familiar cluttered space that was now his center of operations. The desk was clean and the computer was almost new, but the counter and the top of the file cabinet were stacked high with old catalogs and an assortment of junk, as they had always been.

Piles had also accumulated along the wall under the old calendar, which featured a woman in Daisy Duke shorts kneeling on a tractor seat while holding a big wrench and wearing a come-hither smile. It’d been there for as long as Dylan could remember. As a boy, he’d been perplexed by the idea of a scantily clad woman kneeling on the tractor. Every woman he’d ever seen on a tractor had worn jeans and a T-shirt and sat in the seat so that she could drive the thing. And what was with the wrench?

He smiled a little as he put the lunch pail down next to the desk, remembering when he’d come to appreciate those Daisy Dukes and realized that the woman had no interest in plowing fields. He’d barely booted up the computer when the old-fashioned intercom buzzed and Jolie said, “Could you load up this customer?”

He went out into the rain to squeeze three bags of grain into the rear of a Subaru Forester, then decided to shift a pallet of grain for easier access. A few minutes later he came back into the store, shaking water off his hair, his leg giving a little as he turned to close the door.

“Who usually loads?” he asked Jolie, who glanced up from her computer screen.

“Finn.”

“Who loaded customers during the past week?” The transition time between his arrival and Finn’s departure. He knew it wasn’t his grandfather, who’d had a hip replacement a month ago.

“I did.”

“Was the forklift having problems?”

“The engine has been missing, and I had a hard time starting it.” She tilted her head. “Why?”

“It won’t start at all now.”

"I had a feeling this day was coming." She reached for the phone. "Do you want me to call Bobeck's? See if they can send someone over to take a look?"

"I'll do it." It'd been a while since he'd ripped into an engine, but it'd be cheaper than paying Bobeck's mechanics rate. He took a few steps toward the counter and Jolie frowned.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

He'd figured the question would come up since his limp was still noticeable when his leg got tired and he'd made the mistake of overdoing his physical therapy that morning. "Banged up my leg in an accident."

Go ahead, Jolie. Ask what kind of accident. She'd always been brimming with questions about his personal life and comments about his lack of social life. But this time she said only, "Nothing permanent, I hope."

"No. It's almost healed." In a few weeks' time he'd head back to his doctor in Lanesburg, Washington, to get the release he needed to go back to work once Finn returned home, which was why he'd overdone his PT. He had to get that release to continue his career.

"So you can still load the feed? Because if not I'll do it."

"I'm capable." And, besides, there was no way he was going to stand back and let Jolie do it.

"The offer stands," Jolie said, running her gaze over him as if assessing his capabilities.

She was enjoying this. He told himself to walk away, to let it be for now, but instead he said, "We need to talk about working together."

She looked surprised. "In what way? You're the boss, and I'm the employee."

Her matter of fact words felt like a trap.

"In the way that this is not going to be a replay of chem class." She had never understood how important it had been for him to do well in that class, in all his classes. To get those scholarships for his dad, even though it hadn't really mattered in the long run. His dad had passed away before he'd completed his schooling and he'd ended up being a patrol cop instead of a forensic specialist.

She stared at him for a long moment. "That's kind of insulting."

He flattened both palms on the counter in front of him. "I just want us to understand each other."

"Then understand that I'm insulted."

"That wasn't my intention."

"What *was* your intention?"

He felt his blood pressure ratchet up again. It was like a Pavlovian response when she was around—one that he hadn't felt in...oh, ten years. "My intention was to point out that this is not chem class."

"You're repeating yourself, so I'll repeat myself. I'm insulted." Jolie rose to her feet and walked out from behind the counter to take a stance in front of him, arms folded over her chest.

"When I took this job, the last thing I expected was for you to take over, but I can live with it. Finn hired me because I'm good with people and I can keep books. It isn't like it was a mercy hiring." She curled her lips slightly. "And I'm well aware it's not chemistry class...although if you think about it, it's not that much different—you being the supreme boss and me expected to do whatever you say." She pushed her reddish-blond braid over her shoulder with a quick flip of her fingers. "Now, if there's nothing else, I have work to do."

"No," Dylan said, realizing that he'd just been dismissed in his own store. "No. Nothing for now."

* * *

ONCE THE OFFICE door closed behind Dylan, Jolie planted an elbow next to the keyboard on the crowded desk and lowered her forehead into her palm. Dylan was not the only one who didn't want to relive chem class, but damned if she was going to tell him that.

When Finn had gotten the call to duty a few weeks ago, he'd said nothing about Dylan coming back. He'd sat on that bit of news until the day before he'd left; springing it on her at the going-away

lunch they'd shared with his grandfather. She'd assured him it didn't matter; told herself it didn't matter. But it did.

How could it not, when Dylan was still holding on to a ten-year-old grudge? As if it had all been her fault. From day one, he'd made it clear that she couldn't do anything right, so she'd simply quit trying and, toward the end, she'd moved into sabotage...just a little. Enough to make him scramble and to piss him off. A girl could only take being made to feel stupid for so long.

She'd gotten a C in the class. Dylan had gotten an A-and had acted as though the world had ended. Her friends had loved watching the interplay between them and had deemed him hot, because who wouldn't be intrigued by an ultraserious, totally gorgeous guy?

His put-upon lab partner, that's who. Wasn't intrigued then; wasn't intrigued now.

Just...insulted.

Jolie stretched the kinks out of her back and went to stand at the window to look out over the empty parking lot. Finn hadn't been big on change and obviously Dylan was even less so—especially if the suggestions for change came from her. Not that she had any huge ideas, but if someone asked her to come up with suggestions, she'd put her mind to it. Regardless of what the stubborn Culver men believed, they *could* have more customers, if customers had more reasons to come to the place except for feed and seed. Flowers, trees, hand cream. Anything.

Oh, crap. She whirled to face the closed office door. *The box.*

She was halfway to the door, ready to knock and ask for it, when it swung open. Jolie knew it was too late. Way too late.

Dylan walked out carrying the box, an expression on his face that would have made her laugh under any other circumstance. He placed the box on the counter and stepped back, nodding at it.

"Yours?"

Jolie peeked inside, even though she knew exactly what was in it—garter belts, skimpy bikini panties, get-the-girls-up-there bras, lacy stockings. "Yes."

"And this stuff is in my office why?"

"I needed a temporary place to store it between parties. I'm a distributor." Or rather, she had been. She'd quit a few weeks ago when she'd gone to work part-time at McElroy's. There were only so many things a person could work into a schedule... Besides, she'd discovered that in a small community, one could only sell so much lingerie. Missoula and Idaho Falls had been much better markets. "I had a couple back-to-back parties."

"Please don't tell me the parties are one of your ideas to bring in new clients."

"It would work."

"I'll take that as a no." He pushed the box a few inches toward her. "Maybe you could store this at your own place."

She took the box and placed it under the counter. "Will do," she said on a sigh.

He gave her an unsmiling look and headed back to his office, his shoulders held even more stiffly than when they'd been in school. Maybe it was due to his profession. He'd never gone on to solve crimes in a lab or whatever it was he'd planned to do with all that chemistry knowledge, but he had become a cop. And that was all she needed to make her life complete—Dylan Culver with an even bigger authority complex.

The office door remained firmly closed until the clock ticked past 5:30 p.m. At that point, Dylan was no longer her boss, so Jolie turned off her computer, put on her raincoat, grabbed her box of lingerie samples and left the building without saying goodbye. Unprofessional? She had no idea. She didn't want to tap on that office door and appear to be asking permission to leave.

Her sister Dani was practically climbing the walls by the time she got home.

"I'm losing training time with all this rain," she said as she emerged from the kitchen wearing a cherry-print apron. When her fiancé traveled, she ate all her meals with Jolie. "I need my arena. Damned surveyor."

She and her fiancé and Jolie had each put up one third of the money for the training facility, but the company that was supposed to set up the canvas-covered training arena had yet to have the area surveyed and leveled. Until they did, there was no covered arena and thus no training during inclement weather.

“But we’re growing hay as we speak,” Jolie reminded her. She felt like doing a little happy dance. If this continued, there’d be meadow hay in the barn for the first time in years. One item checked off the very long list she’d made in a loose-leaf notebook. When the last item was checked off, Lightning Creek would once again be a bona fide working ranch. Her working ranch...well, hers and her sister’s, but she’d be the one living there, managing it once Dani got married next summer.

“I’ll give you that,” Dani agreed as she returned to the kitchen while Jolie hung her damp coat on a hook near the front door. “But my arena should have been up by now and it’s ticking me off. And it’s not doing your practice schedule any good.”

Jolie’s barrel racing season started in a matter of weeks at the Glennan Memorial Day Rodeo and she and her mare still had some serious work to do to get up to speed. Unfortunately, the soggy conditions made practicing in the outdoor arena impossible, which in turn made it difficult to reestablish herself as a barrel racing contender—which she needed to do if she hoped to eventually establish a business.

She’d moved back to Lightning Creek Ranch with the idea of conducting barrel racing clinics while her sister continued to develop her successful horse training business. Between the two of them, they’d figured they could keep the ranch afloat and make enough to live comfortably—as long as one of them, aka Jolie, worked a steady job to help pay the land taxes and other incidental expenses.

But once she’d moved home, Jolie had found that she hated seeing the ranch lie fallow. All five cows had been bred the previous spring and all had successfully calved. But the fields were a wreck, the buildings needed re-roofing and the irrigation system needed revamping.

The ranch was in even worse shape than it had been during her teen years when it had slowly been slipping away from them as hay and cattle prices tanked. They’d hung on until the prices rebounded, but only by cutting back to bare bones while their mother worked at a full-time job.

So one late night, over a bottle of wine—or had it been two?—Jolie and Dani had come to an agreement. They would put the Lightning Creek right again. It wouldn’t be a big operation, but they would increase the herd, lease out the fields, mow and bale the meadow hay instead of letting it go to waste. With careful management, they should be able to glean enough profit for Jolie to quit her job in a couple of years and until then they’d build the training business.

That had been the plan, anyway. Then Dani had become engaged to Gabe Matthews, the landscape architect who lived in the mansion next door. Even though Dani still used the ranch as her base of operations, revitalizing the Lightning Creek had become more Jolie’s project.

Jolie had no problem with that. Finally she could put a bit of her animal science degree to work in a meaningful way instead of preg-checking cattle on a mega ranch. She also didn’t mind being the decision-maker. As the youngest of four, she’d been bossed around more than the average kid, and enough was enough.

And speaking of being bossed around...

“Guess who my new supervisor is?” Jolie said, following her sister into the kitchen. At the stove, she sipped a little sauce off a teaspoon and reached for the salt.

“Mike?”

“Still laid up from his hip surgery. No. It’s Dylan.”

Dani turned back from where she was taking plates out of the cupboard. “Dylan?” Her mouth twitched.

“It’s not funny, Dan.”

“Is he as hot as ever?”

“I never found him hot.”

“Liar.”

“I could appreciate his attractiveness but it’s difficult to classify someone who is ordering you around and generally pissing you off as *hot*.”

Dani shrugged. “Hot is hot.”

Jolie rolled her eyes and went for the wineglasses. Pasta cried out for wine. So did her rather trying day.

Dani waited until they were seated with the bowl of pasta between them before she said, “I assume you’ll be able to work together?”

“I have little choice. I like my job and once Finn gets back it’ll be back to normal. All I have to do is hang on until then.”

“You’ll play nice with Dylan?”

Jolie smiled with mock sweetness. “Of course, Dani. He’s my employer.”

CHAPTER TWO

DYLAN CLOSED HIS laptop and pushed it aside. Finn wasn’t answering his emails. It was probable that he wasn’t available to answer, given his circumstances, or he might not be opening the mail from his cousin, knowing full well that said cousin had a few choice things to say about the help Finn had hired.

Dylan reached for the bottle on the sideboard next to Mike’s kitchen table—his makeshift desk—and poured a shot of bourbon. The deed was done and now he had to live with it.

He lifted his glass in a salute to his absent cousin. “Up yours, Finn.”

He sipped and leaned back in his chair. Hell, this might all be for the best. Having Jolie around could distract him from the other issues in his life. The box of lingerie had definitely distracted him. Steamy images of Jolie in a garter belt didn’t mesh well with him trying to keep her on task in the store.

Was she still as easily sidetracked as she’d been a decade ago? Did she still head off on those wild tangents when she was supposed to be focused on the matter at hand? Her flippant attitude indicated a possible yes to those questions.

All he needed was to have to do two jobs instead of one. But again, maybe being that busy would keep him from fixating on getting the doctor’s release he needed to go back on patrol and stop riding the desk. Law enforcement might not have been the career he and his father had plotted for him, but he loved it.

He didn’t know if he could handle a desk job for the rest of his career—not unless he was wearing a detective’s badge while doing so. He was scheduled to sit for the exam in a matter of weeks, but it was a crap shoot. He knew better guys than him that had failed it the first go, so he needed a contingency plan to ensure he didn’t end up in Logistics until he did pass the exam. And that plan involved getting a doctor’s release and going out on patrol.

“Hey, Dylan?” His grandfather’s gravelly voice came from the back bedroom where he was sorting through belongings in preparation for his move to a smaller, more manageable house on the edge of town, closer to the store.

“Yeah?” Dylan pushed his chair back and got to his feet, putting the bottle on the sideboard before heading down the hall.

Mike was standing between two cardboard boxes with neatly folded tops. “Can you haul these out to the living room so I have room to maneuver?”

“You bet.” Dylan knew it killed Mike to have to ask for help, but at least he was asking. His recovery from the hip replacement had taken longer than expected because he’d tried to do too much too soon. Apparently he’d learned a lesson.

“Marjorie can’t take the goats.”

Dylan stopped in the doorway. “That’s too bad.”

“Yeah.” Mike shook his head. “I don’t want Maisy and Daisy to become *cabrito* dinner, but I have to be realistic here.”

"I'll find them homes," Dylan promised before heading out to the living room with the first box. By the time he got back, Mike had the second box on the bed.

"This one goes to donation."

"Got it."

Mike nodded and turned back to the closet. He pulled out a garment bag; the one that Dylan knew held his father's wool WWII uniform. "Can't let that go," Dylan said.

"Don't have a lot of room in the smaller place." Mike had been all for moving. Taking care of his menagerie had become too much for him when his hips had started to go, and a house with two stories had been difficult to navigate. Unfortunately, moving to a one-story house meant parting with some of the stuff he'd hung on to for most of his life.

"We'll find room." Mike had been close to his own dad, just as Dylan had been close to his. He couldn't imagine letting go of the few keepsakes he had and didn't want Mike to have to do that, either.

"You know," Mike said, "I've had about enough of packing. Damned depressing business."

Dylan wasn't going to argue. He'd packed everything he'd owned almost exactly a year ago and moved out of his house. His marriage was over, but he still owned half a house he didn't live in—or he would until it sold. Every month he sent his payment to the bank and every month he contacted the real-estate agent to make certain she was doing her best to move the place. Not that he didn't trust Lindsey...but he didn't trust Lindsey. Not since she'd cheated on him, anyway.

"I just poured a shot," he said to his grandfather. "You want one?"

"In the worst way." Mike jerked his head toward the door. "Come on. I'll beat you in a game of cribbage."

* * *

ON HIS SECOND day of work Dylan arrived at the store just after 7:00 a.m., hoping he could figure out what the problem was with the forklift. He stopped inside the doorway and snapped on the lights.

A bulb popped and went out, leaving the place even dimmer than before.

He hated to admit it, but Jolie had a point about the store being dark and depressing.

He traced a finger over the nearest surface, very much as she had done the day before. It was dusty, too. Mike had hired a cheap fly-by-night janitorial service that came in once a week according to Finn. He'd have a talk with the owner the next time he had a few minutes, which, given the volume of customers they'd had the day before, would probably be right after he got the forklift running.

In the meantime...the light.

He set down his lunch pail and went into the supply closet. There were plenty of replacement lightbulbs but no ladder. He could go out to the warehouse and grab the big ladder there, which was covered with grain dust, or he could stand on top of the sturdy wooden shelves his grandfather had built. An elephant could dance on those shelves and they wouldn't budge, so that option seemed reasonable—and a lot easier than dragging the ladder in through the rain.

Lightbulb in hand, he pulled a chair to the shelves and stood on it to push aside the boxes of horseshoe nails, raising a cloud of dust. Yes, he'd talk to the janitors. Today.

He stepped from the chair onto the shelving, searching for a handhold on the top shelf. He took hold of the narrow metal electrical conduit running up the wall and eased himself up, getting a knee onto the second-to-the-top shelf. He could just reach the light fixture from—

His knee slipped and he barely missed clipping his chin as his feet once again hit the chair, which toppled sideways. Wildly, he clutched for something, anything, and then hit the ground next to the chair as horseshoe nails rained down on him.

Shit.

For a moment Dylan sat staring up at the light fixture, the base of the broken bulb held in one hand. At least Jolie hadn't been there to share the moment, although he wouldn't have tried something

that stupid if she'd been there to witness it. No, he'd have made the trip to the warehouse and hauled in the dirty ladder.

He pushed himself to his feet, grimacing at the pain that shot through his hip. Gingerly he flexed his bad leg, glad that he hadn't injured it further. He could only imagine the humiliation of having Jolie find him lying on the floor with a compound fracture or something. As it was, he was bruised but not broken, and he had time to clean up the evidence before anyone got there.

Or in theory he should have had time. He'd just retrieved a broom and dustpan when he heard the very unwelcome sound of the key sliding into the front lock. A few seconds later the door opened, the bell jingled and Jolie stopped dead in her tracks just inside the doorway. Slowly her green eyes moved up from the sea of nails to his face.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said gruffly, shoving aside an empty nail box with his boot.

"Oh, but I do," she said.

She pointed from the broken bulb he'd set on the shelving unit to the burned-out light above him. "Did we break some safety rules?"

"Enough," Dylan said in a clipped tone as he started to sweep nails. Flat nails didn't sweep well.

"After all the grief you gave me about following rules? Enough?" She walked forward, stopping a few feet from him. "Wear your goggles, put on your apron, no elbows on the table."

"I didn't want to lose points for stupid stuff," he said, finally bending to brush the nails into the dustpan with his hand.

"You were crazed."

"I had to do the work of two."

"No. You never gave me a chance."

"You were never serious enough to focus."

Her jaw shifted sideways. "Maybe I acted like that because of the way you treated me."

"Well, that was a crappy thing to do."

"So was treating me like I was stupid," she said, turning and walking around the counter to start up her computer.

"If it walks like a duck..."

"This duck was never given a chance."

"The duck never stopped quacking. And, for the record, I never thought you were stupid."

He glanced over in time to see Jolie's chin come up in an expression that he knew well—in fact, it surprised him how well he remembered.

"I can barely see in here," she said, surprising him by changing the subject instead of launching into an argument. "Do you think you can change that lightbulb without killing yourself?"

He didn't answer as he scooped nails out from under the shelving unit. A second later feet in metallic sandals that showcased intricately painted toenails came into view. He looked up as she dropped a box to the floor.

"For your nails." She cocked her head. "I hope you didn't reinjure your leg."

"No."

"Thank goodness for small blessings, eh?" She turned and walked away.

"Hey," he said, stopping her. "Shouldn't you be wearing shoes with toes?"

"Really?" she asked flatly. "You're going to go there?"

"I get the irony," he said, gesturing to the mess he'd made by breaking the rules himself.

"Worried I'd file a workman's comp claim?"

"Maybe I just don't want you to get hurt."

"Maybe I could wear goggles and a rubber apron, too."

"Damn it, Jolie." Suddenly he was seventeen again, fighting the tide that was Jolie.

“Fine,” she said before he could come up with anything better. “I’ll wear shoes with toes from now on. But...if I find you lying in a heap somewhere, all I’m doing is calling 9-1-1. No first aid. No mouth-to-mouth.”

There was no reason in the world for the term “mouth-to-mouth” to catch his attention, so Dylan pretended it didn’t. But damn if it hadn’t gotten him thinking. And once again those garter belts flitted into his mind, which kind of pissed him off. “If I croak, you may not have a job.”

“As things are now, I may not have a job. Your store is slowly dying, Dylan.”

His mouth tightened as she took her seat behind the counter and shook her mouse, bringing up a screen as she pointedly ignored him.

Given he had no response to her assertion, since he knew she was right, he put his head down and started gathering the remaining nails and dumping them into the box.

* * *

WHO DID HE think he was, lecturing her on safety when he’d attempted to kill himself that morning?

The boss.

Jolie propped her elbows on her desk and pressed her fingertips against her temples.

There was no arguing that point, even though she had. He was the boss. She was the employee. If push came to shove, and if she wanted her paycheck, then she needed to abide by the rules of the game.

Boss. Employee.

So reminiscent of their chemistry class relationship where he’d been the self-appointed boss. She hadn’t been the employee, but she definitely hadn’t called the shots and had resented being ordered around. The curse of being the youngest in the family.

Dylan had finished cleaning up the nails and disappeared out the front door to get the big ladder from the warehouse, so Jolie went to the supply closet and found another lightbulb. She set it on the counter and went to hold the door as Dylan began awkwardly dragging the long stepladder through the entryway.

She waited until he set it up and had a foot on the first rung before she said, “I was out of line earlier.”

He paused, his hands gripping the sides of the ladder, waiting, as if for a punch line.

She didn’t have one.

“Thank you,” he said gruffly before starting to climb. He shot her a quick look after he took out the dead lightbulb, as if still waiting for her to say something else.

Jolie had nothing.

She stood silently with one hand on the ladder, steadying it until he’d climbed most of the way down, then she headed for her side of the counter. She had accounts to mail out today, which meant it would be one of their busier days—that was the way it’d happened the only other time she’d mailed accounts, four weeks ago. It was as if people wanted to get in and charge things quick before they knew how much they owed. But more than 90 percent of their accounts were years old and the people all paid, eventually, according to Finn. Jolie didn’t want to alienate the paying public, so she put a happy face next to the words *past due*, which she wrote in pink ink instead of using the official red-ink stamp.

A couple happy faces later she put down the pen and headed for Dylan’s lair, where she knocked on the half-closed door. He looked up from the file he’d been staring at with a frown.

Dragging in a breath, Jolie took his silence as permission to enter.

“Here to take back your apology?”

“No. Just to say one more thing.”

“I’m all ears.” No. He was all long, lean muscle, but she wasn’t going to allow her mind to drift in that direction.

“Chem class ended ten years ago. Obviously it had a big effect on both of us since we’re sniping at each other like we’re still seventeen.”

“So...?”

“So.” She came forward to lean her palms on his desk. “We say whatever else we want to say on the matter here and now. Get it out and over with, then we bury it. As we should have the instant we knew we had to work together.”

“All right.”

“You go first.”

“I, uh, think I’ve said everything I need to say.” He really couldn’t think of anything that hadn’t been said.

“As have I.”

“Then I guess we move forward.”

She smiled grimly as she pushed off from the desk. “Yes. In closed-toe shoes.”

* * *

THE WOMAN PUT him on edge and then, to confuse the issue, she’d been utterly reasonable just now, suggesting that they bury the past and even apologizing to him.

Had she ever apologized to him before?

What could she have said? “Sorry, Dylan, for my attempts to destroy your 4.0 grade point average and thus affect your scholarship eligibility”?

He hadn’t told anyone back then how important going to college had been to him, and he was kind of glad of that after he’d quit school following his father’s death.

Mike had insisted that he go back and finish his biochemistry degree, but long study sessions and grieving didn’t jibe so he’d quit school and by a fluke had gotten the opportunity to attend police officer training school.

Action had felt good, had helped him get his head together, and after a few weeks on the job he’d realized that he’d accidentally found a profession he could happily make a career of. He might not be a college graduate, but he was doing something that mattered.

Dylan’s lip curled as he massaged the shoulder he’d hit on the shelf on his way down to the floor that morning. He’d trusted Lindsey. And now he felt like a chump, but he wasn’t giving up a career he loved.

“Customer needs loading up.” Jolie’s voice came loud and clear through the intercom. Rather than answer, he headed for the door, limping the first few steps before the knee he’d banged loosened up. He gritted his teeth and kept his stride normal as he walked to the counter where Jolie handed him a ticket. “Red Dodge.”

No doubt, since it was the only vehicle in the lot. “Thanks,” he muttered.

The customer—a good-looking blonde in her early thirties—stood just outside the door. “Hi,” he said as he came out the door before glancing at the ticket. Eighteen bags of alfalfa pellets. “Would you mind backing your truck up to the warehouse door?”

She smiled, her warm brown eyes crinkling attractively at the corners, and held up the keys. “Would you please do it?” she asked. Over her head he saw Jolie raise her eyebrows in an amused way, then look back down at her computer screen.

“Not at all,” Dylan replied, taking the keys.

He was a little surprised when she got into the truck with him rather than wait inside as he’d thought she’d do.

“You’re new here,” she said, flashing a smile his way.

“I’m Dylan Culver,” he said, pointing to the Culver Ranch and Feed sign on front of the building before putting her truck in gear and swinging it in a reverse arc.

“Related to Finn, then?”

“Cousin.”

“Ah,” she said as if he’d said something profound. “I’m Codie James.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dylan said with a quick nod. He maneuvered the truck to the loading area, put it in Park and opened the door, leaving it running. Eighteen trips later, he patted the rear of her truck, giving Codie the signal to drive on. She waved at him in the mirror and pulled away.

Jolie didn’t look up when Dylan came back in—in fact, it was almost as if she were purposely not looking at him.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He came over to lean on the counter. “Nothing my ass.”

Jolie’s fingers stilled on the keys and then she settled her hands in her lap before explaining. “Codie and Finn had a...thing...going on for a while, and I couldn’t help but notice that she was looking at you as if you’re next on the menu.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Dylan was not surprised to find out the two had been involved. Codie looked as if she enjoyed men and Finn enjoyed being enjoyed.

Jolie shrugged one shoulder. “It wasn’t a warning. A guy like you should be adept at reading the signs and making a decision as to whether you want to engage or not.”

“A guy like me?” The question came out before he thought and he instantly regretted it.

“A guy with a hotness factor.”

She spoke so matter-of-factly that for a second he thought he’d misunderstood her. But there really wasn’t any way to misunderstand her meaning.

“Don’t look so stunned. You’re physically fit, good-looking.” She let out a sigh. “Sorry. I thought you knew.”

“I, uh...” He slapped the counter. “I’ve got to go see what the deal is with the forklift.”

“Don’t break any safety rules,” she called as he headed for the door.

He didn’t answer.

* * *

JOLIE WAS STILL smiling when she looked back at the computer. She’d made Dylan Culver blush. Ha.

She finished the accounts, helped a couple of customers buy small items that didn’t require her to roust Dylan from the warehouse where he was either avoiding her or actually fixing the forklift. She’d never known Dylan to back down from anything, so she assumed he was fixing the forklift...but she rather liked the idea of him avoiding her—even if it meant that she was all alone in this depressing store.

At least they’d had a decent number of customers today, which gave Jolie hope that perhaps the past month had been a fluke, and that perhaps once the weather turned nice, people would start coming in...although in her gut she knew that they would go to the bigger stores where they could not only pick up feed but also plants and maybe some better tack.

It was almost five o’clock when Jolie gave up and went out to the warehouse to make certain Dylan wasn’t pinned beneath the forklift or something. She’d assumed he was fine, since she called orders out to the warehouse and no customers had come back in complaining that they hadn’t been loaded. She had not, however, heard the roar of the small forklift and when she walked into the warehouse, the reason was fairly obvious.

Dylan was bent over the engine, muttering to himself and looking as though he was having the time of his life. When the door clicked shut behind her, he stepped away from the machine and Jolie wrinkled her nose as she took in his grease-stained shirt and jeans.

“Whoever does your laundry is going to be pissed,” she said.

“I do my own laundry,” he said, patting the crescent wrench he held into the palm of his hand.

Jolie leaned against the door but didn’t say anything, wondering if he’d done the laundry when he’d been married not that long ago. Finn had mentioned the breakup in passing, but Jolie had asked

no questions. It wasn't her business, although she wondered about the woman Dylan had married. Had she tired of his perfectionist ways? Although...now that she thought about it, perfectionists didn't climb shelves to change a lightbulb. They took the time to get the ladder and do the job correctly. It was possible that the Dylan she thought she knew was not the Dylan standing in front of her.

"I just wanted to check with you before I went home," she finally said when he started frowning at her, as if wondering the direction of her thoughts. He glanced at the dusty clock above the pallets of feed as if surprised at the time.

"See you tomorrow." He patted the wrench in his palm again as he spoke, showing all the signs of an impatient male that wanted to get back to work.

"We had a good day today."

"Yeah." He spoke on a note of caution as if sensing she was about to launch into something. So she did.

"A day with this many customers is unusual. Really unusual."

"I've seen the books." The words came out with enough of a clip to convince Jolie that he was aware of the reality of the situation, so the closed-off look on his face was all the more frustrating.

"I think we could bring in new customers if we're creative."

"And you have ideas." His openly dubious expression made her want to smack him.

"I do," she said evenly.

"Let's hear them."

She felt color starting to rise in her face. "I don't have anything formal put together."

He set the wrench down on the seat of the forklift. "I'm good with informal."

"All right. Well, I thought we might put in a small coffee bar for the regular patrons."

"Because people like to hang around a feed store."

"They might."

"I'm kind of interested in bringing in paying business."

"Well, I've thought about a theme day."

His dark eyebrows came together. "Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know. Western Day? Hawaiian Day?" Okay. That was a wild stab and a bad one, but she wasn't backing down, although she was very aware now that she should have prepared something before broaching this with Dylan the Detail Guy.

"Hawaiian Day?"

"Tiki lights? A luau?" She spoke as if she believed in what she said while knowing she was beat. It was time to back down, to get real, or he would never take any of her ideas seriously. "Okay. Feed store luau isn't such a great idea."

"Maybe we can give a kitten away with each purchase?" Dylan said.

"Like I said. I don't have anything formal, but we've got to do something."

"We?"

Jolie blew out a breath and pulled the keys to her trusty GMC pickup out of her pocket. "You are impossible to work for." And with that, she headed to the door.

* * *

DYLAN WIPED THE smears of oil and grease off his hands with a paper towel. What had started as a seeming quick fix had rapidly escalated into a full-blown overhaul. He hadn't finished because he needed parts, so hopefully no one would want a pallet of wood or anything like that tomorrow. He wadded up the towel and tossed it in the trash. He'd enjoyed his afternoon, which was something considering the way his day had started. Working on engines made him think of his dad—the happy times.

From outside the warehouse he heard Jolie's old GMC fire up. Even it sounded as if it was in a huff over him refusing to consider theme days at the store.

Theme days. Right.

Well, she had been correct about one thing—they'd had a decent day sales-wise, made even better by the fact that he'd been able to load everything by hand.

The business definitely wasn't as good as it had been when he'd been a teen, helping Mike out in every way he could since his dad had been too ill. Finn had brought him up to speed in that regard, but by cutting one full-time position and doing the loading himself, Finn had gotten the place to where it was making a marginal profit—enough to support himself and his grandfather.

Dylan intended to trim even more off the budget. He couldn't get rid of the only other full-time position—the counter person/bookkeeper, aka Jolie—but he was going to look at doing something different with the janitorial side and maybe cut some of the items that didn't turn over as rapidly as the feed. Stock that sat around without selling was money not earning interest.

He studied the forklift for a moment, then, decision made, he set down the wrench. Tomorrow he'd continue the battle. Right now he was tired and hungry.

After rolling down the warehouse door, he went to lock up the store. Jolie had already done that, so he let himself in, grabbed his coat and the lunch pail with his untouched lunch and headed out the door to his empty house. His grandfather had his weekly poker game at the lodge hall, so he'd be eating alone.

He got into his truck and leaned his head against the headrest before starting the engine. He didn't mind being alone, but he hated walking into an empty house. It reminded him too much of what home had been like right after his father died—what he'd been like after his father had died. Alone, more afraid than he'd wanted to let on. Not quite twenty and still in need of some serious guidance, it'd been a rough time to lose his only parent.

He'd rallied then and he'd rally now. You rode life or life rode you. Even though there'd been times over the past months when he'd felt as if he was barely in the saddle, he was going to ride life.

CHAPTER THREE

"DID YOU GIVE Dylan his prescribed dose of pain today?" Dani asked as she plopped down a basket of laundry fresh off the line.

"He was too busy causing his own pain," Jolie said, gathering up a sheet and burying her nose in it. She loved air dried sheets.

"How so?"

Jolie gave her a rundown of how Dylan had attempted to kill himself changing a lightbulb.

"Actually," she said in a musing voice after she'd finished, "it made me like him more—for about a minute." Until he'd shot down her impromptu ideas for attracting new business. "I never dreamed he was a cut-corners kind of guy."

"I don't think you know him very well."

"Are you kidding? We spent about two hundred hours together during our junior year."

"And talked about?"

"The many ways in which I was failing him?"

Dani shrugged and shook out a bed sheet. "You don't know him."

"I know how he made me feel." Jolie reached out to take her side. And how he'd made her feel today, but she wasn't going into that with Dani, so she simply said, "But you're right. I never got past the surface. Something about his attitude toward me put me off." She brought two corners of a sheet together before glancing up at the clock. "Cripes. I gotta get going or I'll be late, and you know how Jim feels about that."

She ran upstairs, slipped into her cowboy boots and threw on a white Western shirt over a rose-pink camisole. The jeans, well worn and just a little on the tight side—thank you, Lycra—were perfect for a night pouring drinks. She pulled her hair into a ponytail, slapped on some lipstick and headed for the door.

Working two jobs and trying to make some headway putting the ranch back together put a crimp in her social life, but she had a dream and student loans. She couldn't pursue her dream and

pay back loans without making a few sacrifices. Her social life had been the first thing she'd put on the chopping block.

"I'm out of here," she called to Dani as she passed the utility room.

"Try not to scare Gus when you come home."

The big dog lifted his head and Jolie leaned down to pet him as she passed by. "I think he's getting used to the idea of me coming home late a couple times a week. Last time he only barked a little."

Unfortunately one booming bark was enough to bring anyone up out of bed.

Jolie ran out to her truck, tossed her purse onto the seat and got inside. Thursday nights weren't bad. Tonight—Friday—the place was usually hopping, making her glad that Culver's was only open for half a day on Saturday. If people wanted feed, they needed to get there before noon, and sometimes after working until two in the morning, closing the bar and getting up at six o'clock to go to work, Jolie found it challenging to stay awake until noon.

But maybe tonight would be the rare quiet Friday night.

* * *

DYLAN DIDN'T OFTEN get the sense that the walls were closing in on him—or rather he hadn't until he'd moved back home. Even his grandfather had noticed. The poker game had been canceled, Dylan had done the PT for his leg before dinner and now the two of them were attempting to watch a basketball game.

"Look up old friends," Mike said.

Old friends. He'd been gone for a long time—more than a decade—and the majority of the people he'd gone to school with had moved on to careers in other areas of the state. And, frankly, he didn't feel like connecting with anyone from his past—not until he figured out his present and his future.

"Join my poker game next week," Mike suggested. "We need a few more players."

"You guys would fleece me," Dylan said. He was only half kidding. Mike and his friends pretended to play for pennies, but they were actually out for blood.

"Yeah, maybe," Mike allowed with a half smile.

"Maybe I'll head down to McElroy's Tavern, catch up with Jim and Mac." Everything in him wanted to stay holed up, to continue licking his wounds and avoiding company, but in the long run that wasn't going to work. He had to get out, start building a new life.

"Jim you can catch up with," Mike said. "Mac's working across the state at the oil patch. He only makes it home every few weeks."

"I guess I do have some catching up to do." He considered for a moment then said, "You want to come with me?"

"You want to go out with your grandfather?"

"Yep."

Mike scowled at him, as he had when Dylan had been younger and tried to get off work at the store early.

"Come on," Dylan said with a smile.

"I'll go for one beer."

"Agreed."

"Let me change my shirt," Mike said, pushing himself to his feet. "Although I don't think going out with your grandfather is the best way to get your social life up and running."

"It's a start," Dylan said. And about all he felt like dealing with at the moment.

They arrived early in the evening, but there was already a decent-size crowd filling the place. The bar area was crowded, so Dylan jerked his head toward one of the few empty tables near the door.

"Hold the table," Dylan said. "I'll get the round."

Mike pulled out a chair and Dylan started toward the bar, edging up as a space opened. Jim was busy filling orders and it was pretty obvious that Dylan wouldn't be doing much more than saying hello.

He scanned the crowd as he waited, recognized a few faces but not that many. Apparently most of the people his age were home doing family things. Once upon a time he'd been at home doing family things—when he hadn't been on shift.

He finally reached the bar, moving over as a server squeezed past him to slip behind the bar and set down a tray. He watched as she bent over in front of him, pulling bottles out of the cooler, took in a long, reddish ponytail and a nicely curved ass that seemed oddly familiar. Then she stood, met his eyes in the mirror behind the bar and he realized whose ass he'd been admiring.

"Let me know when you've seen enough," Jolie said without bothering to turn around.

How the hell did a guy respond to that?

Dylan's mouth tightened and she seemed to take that as an acknowledgment of her touché, turning toward him and meeting his eyes in an unsmiling way before bending to take clean glassware out of the rack beneath the bar.

"I didn't realize you worked here," he said.

"I do," she said, loading dirty glasses into the rack. She worked quickly, her movements precise, well practiced.

"Jolie," Jim called without turning his head, "get the limes going when you have a second."

"Sure thing." She finished the loading and then turned to pull some limes out of the small fridge.

"What can I get you?" she asked, looking up at Dylan once again, her expression all business—very much the way he'd like to see it at the store.

"Two Buds."

"Draft?"

"Whatever's easiest."

She pulled a couple of long-necks out of the cooler, set them on the bar, popped the tops and pushed them forward. "Tab?"

Dylan shook his head and slapped down a ten. "Keep the change."

He thought she was going to argue, but she took the bill and turned to the register. Dylan grabbed the bottles and headed back to his grandfather.

"Is that Jolie Brody?" Mike asked as he took the bottle.

Dylan sat with his back to the wall, telling himself to keep his eyes off Jolie although they kept drifting in her direction. "In the flesh."

Mike twisted his mouth thoughtfully. "Doesn't she work for us?"

"She does. Must be moonlighting."

"No law against that," Mike said. "But I can't help wondering how much sleep she gets."

"I guess it doesn't matter as long as she does a decent job for us."

"Finn liked her."

"Finn likes all women," Dylan replied dryly.

"Takes after me," Mike said with a grin. "But I don't think he liked her that way. I think he liked her like a friend."

Dylan tried to imagine he and Jolie being friends...the image wasn't gelling. And he also didn't seem to be able to stop watching her. Cop training kicking in, he told himself. He scanned crowds. He noticed things. He watched people. But he was watching Jolie more than was necessary under the circumstances.

And so were several other guys in the room.

Even when he was talking to his grandfather, he was aware of just where she was in the room. Behind the bar, schlepping drinks to a table, disappearing outside for what was probably a brief break from the heat in the room.

“Making sure she doesn’t get herself into trouble?” Mike asked on a wry note.

“Just...” Dylan shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“She’s a good-looking gal,” Mike said gently.

“And I’m still putting my life back together after the last good-looking gal. Besides, she works for us.”

Mike took a drink of beer. Now he was following her with his eyes. “Finn said she’s going into business with her sister eventually.”

“Trying to set me up?” Dylan asked on a note of amusement, although the thought made him kind of nervous. His grandfather had a lot of friends, who probably had granddaughters...

“Nah,” Mike said. “You can handle that part of your life.” He smiled a little as he lifted his beer. “You’re on your own.”

Dylan almost believed him.

* * *

DYLAN LEFT EARLY. One drink with his grandpa and he was out the door. Jolie had to give him points for spending time with family, but it was Friday night. He’d hooked up with a couple of old high school friends, Jess Moody and Les D’Angelo, who were now county deputies—not that Jolie had been keeping track of him or eavesdropping as she cleared a nearby table or anything—and been invited to play pool.

Mike had looked game, but Dylan had shaken his head and not long after that had left. Jolie’s first thought as she’d watched the heavy wooden door swing shut behind him was *Way to party hearty, Dylan*. The second was that he’d been through a divorce and probably still felt like crap. She needed to give the guy a break...pretty generous thought on her part considering the way he’d blown her off that day.

After he’d left the crowd picked up even more and the rest of the night passed in a blur as busy nights in a bar tended to do. She stayed late to help Jim close and suggested that next time one of the help called in sick on a weekend night, he try harder to find a sub.

“Sorry about that,” he said as he counted out a stack of bills and slapped a rubber band around them. “Won’t happen again. But, hey—” he grinned as he looked up at her “—you made a million in tips.”

That she had.

“I’ll happily split them tomorrow,” she said.

“You keep them. And sorry I didn’t get to Maddox sooner.”

Maddox was a local bully/buffoon who loved to mess with the servers when he’d had a few too many. Jim usually nipped matters in the bud, but tonight he’d been too swamped to deal with the guy early on.

“Not a problem. I’m pretty adept at dodging him.”

“I’ll ban him if he doesn’t stop. And if Dee is still sick, I’ll get my sister to help.”

“Thanks, Jim. See you.”

Twenty minutes later she walked up to her door. Gus let out one mighty bark, no doubt waking Dani, then practically flattening her in his joy to see her again, home safe and sound. She crept through the house without turning on lights, but Dani was awake. She could hear her punching her pillow a few times to get into proper sleeping shape—a habit she’d had since they were little girls sharing a room.

“Sorry,” Jolie called softly.

“Not a problem,” Dani muttered as Jolie stepped into her own room and closed the door.

She dumped her tips on the dresser, shucked out of her clothes and tossed them into a heap—bar clothes never got worn more than once before seeing the washing machine—then slipped into her oversize Grizzlies T-shirt and climbed into bed. And there she lay awake. That last encounter with

Dylan in the warehouse was still weighing heavily on her mind. Her ideas hadn't been the greatest, but he could have brainstormed with her instead of subtly mocking her.

Or had it been subtle?

Whatever, he'd mocked her instead of trying to get on board with ideas that were only meant to help. She needed to come up with a way to bring some customers into the store—and not only to provide herself a more secure future there. She wanted to show him that she wasn't the screw-up he seemed to think she was. And, damn it, she was going to do that.

A big, slurpy dog kiss awoke her a little after seven o'clock after she'd slept through her alarm and she groaned as she rolled over. Gus took that as an invitation to heave his big body up onto her bed. Since it was a twin bed, Jolie had little choice but to be engulfed with fur or get up.

Grudgingly she chose the latter. It was going to be a long morning at the feed store, but the one bright spot to having gotten next to no sleep was that she had finally come up with a way to bring in some business. An idea that should work.

No. An idea she was going to *make* work, because she wasn't going to spend the time until Finn returned being treated like some mindless bimbo who needed constant management.

* * *

JOLIE WAS LATE.

She'd been early every other day this week, but today she was already fifteen minutes late. Dylan wondered if he was going to have to call when her truck roared into the parking lot, swung around the building and parked next to his.

She didn't notice him standing at the edge of the warehouse bay as she scrambled out, slammed the truck door and then started jogging toward the side entrance. Dylan stayed where he was, debating. Did he want to be a dick about this? No. Things happened. People ran late.

It was just that he had a good idea she was late because she was working her other job and the anal part of him said that his business shouldn't suffer because she needed another paycheck.

He turned and walked into the warehouse. They both knew why she was late and he assumed it wasn't a habit. Finn might have liked her as a friend, but he wouldn't put up with poor job performance.

He walked to the forklift and flipped the ignition. The machine chugged to life and kept running. Dylan climbed aboard and started shifting pallets, making room for a new shipment due later that morning.

A new shipment that he half wondered if they needed.

The store had had no customers so far this morning, with the exception of a woman who'd stopped by with a desperate look on her face, wondering if they had hoof glitter. She was on her way to a rodeo and needed it for her performance. Jolie had been in the back room, so Dylan had delivered the sad news that they didn't carry hoof glitter.

"Well, do you have hoof black?" she'd asked.

Again he'd shaken his head. "We specialize more in feed and general tack."

The lady had looked around at the grim interior, nodded, and said thanks just as Jolie came out of the backroom.

"We didn't have what she needed?"

"Hoof black?"

"Would it kill us to have a few bottles?" she asked.

"Yes," Dylan said bluntly.

"You're in a mood."

"Maybe I have my reasons."

She folded her arms over her chest. "If my being late is one of the—"

"No."

"Does your leg hurt? Because of the fall?"

“No.”

She closed her mouth at his second abrupt answer, then when he didn't say anything else, turned and walked to her computer, her denim skirt accentuating the swing of her hips.

Wisely, given his dark mood, she gave him a wide berth during the few hours before closing, but as soon as he flipped the Open sign around to Closed, he turned to find her standing a few feet behind him, arms folded over her chest, as if she'd been waiting for the perfect moment to attack.

“I've been thinking about the hoof black lady...and the slow day.”

“And you want to know why I won't add a lot of miscellaneous stock?” She raised a shoulder, which he took to be a yes. “Because stock that doesn't move is money that could be earning interest in the bank.”

“I get what you're saying. But, Dylan, adding a little more stock might help sales.”

“What exactly do you think we should add?”

She looked as if she'd been waiting for him to say those exact words. “I want to add a few fun things to the inventory.”

“Fun?”

“Well, maybe not as fun as hoof glitter, but things that people, women mostly, might buy on impulse.”

“Like, say...”

“Jewelry.”

He gave a scoffing laugh. “Jewelry.”

“Yes.” She tilted her chin sideways in that stubborn way he knew all too well. “And if we do it right, it won't cost you anything.”

“How do we do it right?”

“By creating a Western-themed boutique—” she held up a hand as Dylan started to interrupt her “—stocked with commission items. No initial outlay. If it fails, we lose nothing.”

Dylan tried to come up with a reason this wasn't a good idea...and drew a blank.

“And before you get all negative—”

“You're pretty sure I'm going to do that?”

“History does tend to repeat itself.”

“I'm not negative... I'm serious. A realist.”

“Well, sometimes, Dylan, it feels good to believe that good things can happen.”

“Where, if I won't be perceived as negative for asking, do these commissioned items come from?”

“Local artisans.”

“I do not want a bunch of doilies in the store,” he said adamantly.

“There's nothing wrong with doilies...but I was thinking along the lines of...other things.”

“What kinds of things?”

“I can show you examples.” She walked behind the counter and dug into her bag, coming up with her phone. She turned it on and started flipping through photos.

“Here—this wine rack looks cool. And there are these cow-themed photo frames. I thought some pottery might be nice...” Her voice trailed off as she took a long, hard look at him. “I'm talking to myself, aren't I?”

“Jolie, I have enough to do trying to run the part of the store that I know works.”

“It doesn't work, Mr. Realist,” Jolie said. “We need customers. This might bring people in—just like it does in the bigger ranch stores.”

Dylan shook his head. “I don't—”

Jolie pointed a finger at him. “I know you don't. And you won't.”

“This is my grandfather's business.”

“And that means you're going to run it the way it's always been run come hell or high water?”

"I don't want a freaking boutique in my feed store."

"One month."

"What?"

"Give me one month. We'll see if the customer base increases." She folded her arms over her chest. "I'll do everything. All you have to do is allow me the space."

"You can get people—artisans—to sign on for one month?"

The corners of her mouth lifted in a slow smile. "I can do anything."

The way she said it made him believe her. "What happens after the trial period," Dylan asked, "if the customer base doesn't increase?"

"I send everything back to the artisans and thank them for their time. However, I think the bigger question is what happens if it does increase."

"I have more money in the till?"

She stared at him as if waiting for the correct answer.

"You want a raise?"

She slowly shook her head. "No. If the customer base increases, you are going to admit to me that I was right."

"All right," he said slowly, sensing there was more.

"And you are taking me out on the town. Wherever I want to go. Whatever I want to do."

He frowned deeply even as something kicked inside him at the thought of going out with Jolie. "Why?"

"Maybe, for once, I'd like to call the shots." She smiled darkly. "And I need to warn you... I am not a cheap date."

CHAPTER FOUR

DYLAN LEANED AN elbow on the counter. "Why do I get the feeling that this is more about making me pay for past crimes than you getting to call the shots?"

She glanced at her fingernails. "Maybe they're one and the same."

"That's what I thought."

She looked up, her green eyes lit with...something. "But you know..." she said slowly, "this might be good for you."

"How so?"

"You need to loosen up. Stop analyzing every facet of your life."

"And you can help me with that?"

"Being loose is my forte." Dylan's lips automatically quirked and Jolie rolled her eyes. "Not what I meant."

"And there go my fantasies."

Where in the hell had that come from?

It was those damned garter belts. Even Jolie looked a little surprised at his unexpected words. No, she looked a lot surprised. And she called him on it.

"Do you care to explain that comment?"

Scrambling for an answer, since he couldn't exactly say "garter belts," Dylan countered with, "Can you explain why you say half the things you say to me?"

"To put you off-kilter."

"That's why I said it." He hoped. He waited a beat then asked, "Did it work?"

"Yes. I was definitely thrown off my game for a few seconds."

"I'll have to do more of that."

"I'll have to do the same."

Back on safe ground.

"Could make for an interesting few months."

"Is that what you want, Dylan? An interesting couple of months?"

The question gave him pause. He'd come home to help out Finn and Mike, to plot out his future and to try to put the past behind him. Pretty much the last thing he'd been looking for was "interesting," but he wouldn't mind being distracted. For the first time in his life he didn't have an immediate goal and it made him edgy. Being loose was not his forte.

"I don't know what I want," he said honestly.

"I know what I want. I want to class this place up and I want to start by putting in a gift store."

Dylan gritted his teeth, wondering how she'd managed to circle around so smoothly while he was still trying to get a foothold. "One month." Her face brightened. "Increase our customer base in one month." And he'd figure out a way to let Mike know that change was afoot without having him come unglued.

Jolie cocked her head. "On second thought, that's not enough time."

Dylan fought with himself then decided it was easier to give in. She'd probably lose interest after a few weeks and he'd never have to break the news to his grandfather. Jolie had never had a lot of follow-through.

"Two months," he finally said. "Max."

"I can agree to two."

He smirked at her. "Generous, considering you asked for one."

"But the time doesn't start until I have a display area and the artisans are contracted. Right?"

"Depends on how long you take doing that," he said before he turned and headed for the door, making his escape while he could. He needed some quality time with the forklift.

Dylan blew out a breath as he crossed to the warehouse. He was all for more business, but it had to be business that meant something to him, not just people popping in to buy a trinket...not that he believed that anyone was going to be trinket shopping in a feed and seed store. And, truthfully? He didn't believe there would ever be a commissioned gift shop in Culver Ranch and Feed.

He rolled up the warehouse door instead of the main door and walked inside when Marcel, the big orange cat that patrolled the premises, shot past the forklift. Marcel was usually invisible, preferring to do his patrolling under the cover of darkness. The cat poked his head out from between two pallets then disappeared again.

That reminded Dylan. He had to call another of his grandfather's friends to try to find homes for most of Mike's livestock. If he couldn't find them homes, then he was going to have to come up with a solution as to what to do with a couple of goats, a dry milk cow and several barn cats. The chickens and ducks—the easy animals to give away—would go with Mike to his new house. The cats were too wild to move. The place wasn't zoned for goats and cows.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the phone number he'd written on the sticky note and then crossed to the phone hanging on the warehouse wall. Maybe this nice lady would take at least one of the crew off his hands.

* * *

THAT EVENING A white crew-cab Ford with a logo on the side pulled out of the Lightning Creek driveway just as Jolie pulled in. She hadn't caught the lettering on the side of the truck, but it was obvious from the orange stakes in the field that the surveyor had finally showed up. Not only that... Gabe was back from his trip and he and Dani now stood near the surveyed plot, deep in conversation. Jolie parked her truck and, gathering her coat around her, headed over to where her sister and future brother-in-law stood.

"Wow," Jolie said. "Officially surveyed. The first big step toward training in the rain."

"Yup." Gabe looped an arm around Dani and Jolie instantly knew something was up. Dani had on her brave face and Gabe's expression was taut—neither looked as though they were celebrating a milestone.

Oh, great. "Hey, welcome back," Jolie said to Gabe as if nothing were amiss. "I thought you weren't due until Tuesday."

“Change of plans.” He smiled at her, his tense expression relaxing a bit. He was a good-looking guy—dark-haired, blue-eyed—and wildly in love with her sister, which made their strange behavior after his early return all the more disturbing.

“What happens now with the arena?” she asked, playing along.

A gust of wind hit them as she spoke and Dani pulled her sweatshirt hood up over her hair. “As soon as the area is leveled, then the crew comes to put up the walls and stretch the canvas over the ribs.”

Yeah. There definitely wasn’t enough excitement, but after bouncing a quick look between Gabe and Dani, Jolie decided not to ask questions. Instead she smiled. “After I move the cows, maybe we should break open a bottle of wine, warm up some leftover pasta and celebrate in style.”

“Sounds good,” Gabe said.

“All right, Gus. Let’s move the girls.” The big dog had enough Border collie in him to be a decent cow dog and he dearly loved it when he got to help Jolie move the cattle from the area she had them grazing to the next. Dani had always been a strict horsewoman, but Jolie had an affinity with cattle, therefore as soon as she got home, she took over their care. Dani would move to the Staley property, where Gabe lived, once they married, so, all things considered, it made perfect sense for her to handle cattle matters.

Jolie marched out across the pasture. The cows, knowing the routine, fell in behind her, new calves trotting close to their mothers’ sides. It was as if they all knew Jolie was going to open the electric fence that kept them from grazing the new growth. She allowed them into the knee-deep grass, shutting them off from the area they’d just eaten down.

In another day, she would open another gate and continue the process. It had taken her and Dani a couple of days to string the wire, creating what amounted to grazing cells, but the two days’ work would pay off in more efficient grazing and less impact to the pasture through overgrazing.

The cows streamed into the area past her as she held the wire. As soon as the last one was in, she reconnected the wire. Gus gave a mighty bark, as if he’d just taught those bovines a thing or two then fell in beside Jolie as she headed back to the house. Gabe and Dani were on the porch, again in conversation.

Jolie bit her lip.

They’ll tell you whatever it is when they’re ready.

But she hated unfinished business and her stomach was working its way into a knot, so she did what she always did—smiled and pretended nothing in the world bothered her. She should have known better than to try that with the sister who knew her too well.

“It’s nothing,” Dani said as they followed Gabe into the house.

Jolie nodded and trotted upstairs to change into a sweatshirt and jeans. When she got back downstairs, Gabe had the wine open and Dani was reheating the pasta in the microwave.

“That little black heifer calf slipped under the wire again and her mama went nuts,” Dani said conversationally.

“I take it she slipped back in?”

“After wandering around, exploring. I think she was just torturing her mom a little.”

“Like we did,” Jolie replied.

“I can’t believe you two would do that,” Gabe said on a wry note.

“We didn’t mean to,” Dani said. “It was just that Mel and Allie were so—”

“Anal.”

“I was going to say perfect.”

“Have it your way,” Jolie said. She caught her sister’s eye and they laughed. The four Brody sisters were tight, and had become tighter after their father had passed away, but it was no secret that Allie and Mel were the serious older sisters, who’d taken it upon themselves to help shoulder their mother’s burden. Dani and Jolie had done what they could, but they’d been young.

"They were overly responsible," Dani said to Gabe.

Gabe handed them both a glass of wine. Dani raised her glass in a salute. "To the arena."

Glasses clinked and once again Dani and Gabe exchanged a glance.

Jolie set down her wine. "I was going to be polite and not pry, but...what's going on? Is one of you pregnant or something?"

"N-no," Dani sputtered, looking startled at the question.

Jolie shrugged one shoulder. "I wouldn't have really minded that."

"In good time," Gabe said, settling a possessive hand on Dani's shoulder. He looked down at her and she nodded.

"It's no big secret—"

"It's more like a startling new development," Gabe said. "I just got offered an eighteen-month position filling in for a friend of mine."

"Where?" Jolie asked, lowering the wine she'd been about to sip.

"Pennsylvania."

"That's a long way from here."

"Yeah," Dani said. "But it's only eighteen months, great contacts for Gabe."

And no doubt a nice chunk of change. Gabe had invested almost everything he had in the Staley property next door to keep the Lightning Creek Ranch from becoming neighbors with a large resort and water park.

"So what does this mean?"

"We still have to decide." Dani spoke a little too brightly. And she'd yet to touch her wine.

"You know I'd hold down the fort while you're gone," Jolie said.

"I plan to stay here," Dani said.

"Why?"

"I'm building a business."

"You could take a hiatus. You started from scratch a year ago and look what you have now. A crammed schedule."

"We talked about that," Gabe said. And that was all he said. The microwave bell dinged and they all glanced over at the machine, as if it had some answers.

"I had a startling development myself," Jolie said, sensing the need to change the topic. Dani and Gabe obviously still had some talking to do and she couldn't blame them. Eighteen months was a long time. "Dylan agreed to let me set up a commissioned Western gift shop at the store."

"I didn't know you wanted to do that."

"It seems a good way to attract people." Jolie took the bowl out of the microwave and carried it to the table. "It can't hurt. I'm working on expanding his stock, too, but he has this thing about not having stuff that doesn't move well."

"He has a point," Gabe said.

"The store is dying. I know a gift store isn't the big answer, but it might spark more business. We have to do something or I'll be looking for another job and I like working there. It pays okay and I'm pretty much my own boss for most of the day and it's close."

"It's hard to compete with chain stores," Gabe said.

"But Culver's is a local institution. You'd think people would—"

"Do what's convenient unless they have a reason to do otherwise." Gabe made a considering gesture with one hand. "The gift store isn't a bad start. Maybe some advertising."

"Yeah. I thought of that, too. Dylan's only here until Finn comes back, so on the one hand, I don't think he wants to make tons of changes, but on the other, I don't think he wants the store to die on his watch."

"He's not staying?"

Jolie shook her head. “He’s only here until Finn gets back.” Rather than talk about Dylan, a subject that made her feel oddly unsettled, she wanted to ask more questions about the arena—when the walls would be installed and the canvas cover arrive—but one look at her sister’s strained expression and she didn’t say a word on the subject.

Later that evening, though, as Dani was getting ready to walk to the Staley house with Gabe, Jolie cornered her upstairs in her old bedroom where she was digging through her coat closet.

“Have you seen my gray fleece?”

“I think you already took it over to Gabe’s.” Her sister was in the slow process of moving her belongings to the mansion, where she spent most of her off time.

Dani continued shuffling through the hangers with a slight air of desperation. “I can’t find it over there.”

“Are you okay?”

Dani leaned back out of the closet. “Of course.”

Jolie nodded in a way that clearly stated her disbelief. Dani gave a small snort and went back to her search. “He needs to take this job. It’ll be a boost to his consulting business.”

“Is business bad now?”

“No. But there’s a lot of competition out there and he isn’t exactly in an urban environment. He depends a lot on word of mouth and this could really help.”

“Eighteen months is a long time.”

The hangers quit clacking together and Jolie heard her sister sigh. “It isn’t like he’ll be gone the entire time. Military wives put up with long separations.”

“Yes, they do.”

Dani poked her head out again. “I’m just a little taken aback. It never dawned on me that we might have a lengthy separation in our future.”

“Why don’t you go with him?” Even though Jolie hated the thought of running the ranch alone on top of everything else. But she could do it. For her sister.

“I might,” she said. “But...what’ll I do? Sit in an apartment and knit?”

Jolie raised an eyebrow. “Really, Dan? Worst-case scenario? That’s not like you.”

Dani came out of the closet, a fleece in each hand, neither of them remotely gray, and sat on the bed. “I know.” Her shoulders sank. “I didn’t expect this. The job offer or my reaction.”

Jolie sat beside her and put an arm around her. “Yeah. Just when it looks like smooth sailing, a bump always appears.”

“I need to man up.”

“No one wants to spend time away from someone they love.”

“I’m tougher than this. But...” She made a helpless gesture. “I have never felt so freaked out by a separation before. What is wrong with me?”

“You guys will figure this out.”

“I guess. If you see my gray fleece, let me know.” She gave Jolie a sharp look. “It’s not in your closet?”

“I never wear gray if I can help it.”

After Dani and Gabe said their goodbyes and headed off across the pasture to his place, Jolie poured herself a glass of wine.

Love, it appeared, could be a major inconvenience—not only to the happy couple, but also the ranch-tending sister.

* * *

JOLIE SPENT THE next day trying to shove Dani’s dilemma out of her head—no easy task since the sisters had always had each other’s back during times of trouble. She called artisans in the area she’d located through internet searches, asking if they had any stock they wouldn’t mind

displaying on commission. The majority seemed interested—until discovering that the person calling wanted to display their wares in a semi-rural ranch store.

She booked one potter and thanked the rest, asking if they knew of other people who might be interested. She'd planned to keep her list of contributing artisans small to begin with, never dreaming that she might have to really scrape to find *anyone* interested in displaying at the store.

She leaned back in her chair, refusing to allow herself to feel defeated. She could do this. She would do this—not only for the store, but because Dylan so obviously thought it was a bad idea.

There had to be local people who produced artisan items. Perhaps even an artist.

Jolie knew only one local artist who just happened to be a royal pain in the butt; but there had to be more. This artist, however, had the potential to actually send clients to Culver Ranch and Feed.

Jolie blew a breath that puffed out her cheeks, fought with herself for another minute and then called Marti Kendall to ask if she would like to display her watercolors.

And as she dialed, she wondered which Marti she'd be talking to. People who were merely acquainted with the horse trainer were invariably charmed. Those who'd grown up with her were more familiar with the feeling that you never knew whether Marti would be your friend that day or your foe. It all depended on what was in it for Marti. But they'd had several years of high school art together and Marti was one hell of a watercolor artist. More importantly, having her artwork in the store might bring in business from her horse ranch clients.

"In Culver Ranch and Feed?" Marti said on a note of disdain after Jolie explained that she was starting a commissioned boutique.

Jolie gritted her teeth and explained, "We're trying something new. I thought that your watercolors would bring people in and that would help the other artists." Nothing wrong with a stroke of the ego—especially when Marti's was so stroke-able—and no need to explain that at the moment there was only one other artisan.

"True," she said. "I could bring in a few of my smaller pieces."

"I'd love to feature them." Jolie held her breath.

"I'd need a decent display area. I don't want them stuck up over some dusty shelves with fly spray on them."

"I'm in the process of building a display area." Or she would be. Soon. All she needed to do was to figure out what was on hand to build it with.

"Will I be able to see the display area first?"

Jolie forced herself to smile to keep her voice light. "Sure. I should be done by Friday of next week." Which would give her twelve days to come up with something worthy of Marti's work.

"Great. I'll see you then."

Jolie hung up and pinched the bridge of her nose. Having Marti would be a good thing. Especially if they could talk her into buying her feed there, since her father owned one of the premier horse ranches in the area.

A thump at the window drew her attention and she turned to see the big orange cat sitting on the sill, studying her with his wide yellow eyes. After Finn left, the cat had started appearing at the window regularly and Jolie realized that there was no one there to feed the big feline except her. The cat put his paws up on the window once he realized he had her attention and batted at the glass, looking very much like a mime trying to get out of a glass box.

"Coming." She grabbed her jacket and made her way to the warehouse where she kept the food in a plastic container. The cat strutted in after her, keeping his distance then breaking into a trot when he heard the lid come off the food container.

"Oh, yes," Jolie said as she dished out the kibble. "You are a cool customer, aren't you?" The cat brushed past her. He didn't tolerate being touched, but when she fed him, he always managed to throw his body against her leg at least once in a fly-by show of gratitude.

Jolie replaced the container on the shelf, then stood there taking in the stillness of the warehouse. Whenever she had to venture out there during the day, Dylan had his radio playing, a local station with a mix of old rock-and-roll and country standbys. He never plugged in headphones, almost as if he wanted to be on the alert.

Well, he had been a cop. It was probably a survival thing.

Jolie strolled over to the forklift, giving the cat his space so that he could eat without worrying that she might try to touch him or something. How many times had Dylan disassembled the thing since he'd been back? At least twice. But the last time he'd used it she'd noticed that the nasty miss in the engine had been fixed.

After checking for grease, she eased up into the driver's seat and put her hands on the wheel. Finn had taught her to operate the thing, in case he was unavailable, but she'd only had to load a couple of times. Truth be told, she wasn't that anxious to drive the forklift on a regular basis. She was good with a tractor, had done her time on the swather and baler during her teens, but she had the oddest feeling that she and forklifts were not meant to be. Maybe something about the ability to skewer anything in her path.

The sound of a truck pulling in from the rear entrance brought her head up. Dylan.

Please don't ask how many artisans I've booked.

She got off the forklift and started for the door, but Dylan walked in before she got there. The cat took one look at the intruder and shot across the warehouse, disappearing behind some grain bags. Dylan looked down at the half-eaten bowl of cat kibble, then back up at Jolie.

"Marcel was eating while you were in here?"

Jolie frowned back at him. "Obviously."

"Huh."

"Huh what?"

"Marcel doesn't like people."

"He does if you feed him. A few days after Finn left, he came to tell me that his bowl hadn't been filled for a day or two. After I fed him, he decided I was okay." The phone rang, sounding over a loudspeaker. Dylan picked up the warehouse extension.

"Culver Ranch and Feed. Marti...of course I remember. What can I do for you?"

He listened for a moment then held the phone out to Jolie, watching her curiously as she said, "Hi, Marti."

"I can bring in eight pieces, but after giving the matter a bit of thought, I think I'd like an 80-20 split instead of 70-30."

Jolie shifted her gaze to the far side of the warehouse. She very much wanted to say, "No, that's not fair to the other artists." Except there was only one other artist, so instead she said, "How about 75-25?"

A long silence followed and Jolie wondered if she was going to have to do without watercolors. Then Marti said, "For the first month. After that, we can renegotiate."

"Sounds fair. I'll have the agreement ready when you stop by."

"A week from this Friday."

"That's right," Jolie said brightly.

"See you then."

Dylan hadn't moved during the conversation and when Jolie hung up the phone, she found herself standing a little closer to him than she'd expected. She didn't step back. Stepping back simply wasn't her way.

"Marti Kendall is one of your artists?"

"She does beautiful watercolors of horses." Jolie got the distinct feeling that Dylan was also very aware they were standing too close and he wasn't going to be the one to back off.

"Do you have anyone else interested besides Marti?"

“One potter.”

“Only one other artist?”

“I’ve been kind of busy doing my job,” Jolie said dryly.

“How many people did you ask?”

“Look,” she said, forcing herself to focus on coming up with an answer rather than the man standing too close to her because they were both too stubborn to back off. He smelled...good. “I just started this process and there was nothing in our agreement about reporting my progress to you.”

“Let’s make an addendum.”

“I called nine people.”

“And got one.”

“It’s a feed store, Dylan.”

“That is exactly why this probably isn’t going to work.”

“Do you always give up this easily?” she blurted.

Dylan looked surprised. “I never give up easily.”

“Then why do you expect me to?”

He opened his mouth and abruptly closed it again. The cat peeked out from behind a row of shovels and Dylan jerked his head toward the door. “Maybe we should get out of here so Marcel can finish eating.”

“Sure.” It was the perfect excuse to put some physical distance between them and she was glad that he’d been the one to suggest it. She also had the strong feeling that she would not have liked whatever he’d been about to say.

They’d just stepped outside when the phone rang. Jolie forced a smile. “Ah. Probably an artisan calling back.” She gave him a smug nod then headed back into the warehouse to the extension phone.

* * *

DYLAN WATCHED JOLIE GO, fairly certain it was not an artist on the phone. Why would an artist display their stuff in a feed store? It made no sense. He had to admit, though, that Jolie wasn’t rolling over in the face of adversity—not yet anyway—but he had a feeling it was because she knew he expected her to fail. He did, but he didn’t need to harp on the matter.

So, in the interest of maintaining a peaceful work environment—and also because he seemed to be noticing a few too many things about his bookkeeper, like the way she wore her jeans—Dylan would keep their relationship briskly businesslike.

For the remaining days of the week, he did not mention the gift boutique and Jolie kept quiet on the matter, too, which made him believe that the project was indeed falling by the wayside.

At least she had given it a shot. And he had to admit that he kind of felt bad when he walked through the store and heard her talking earnestly on the phone to someone who was probably in the process of telling her no dice. He didn’t say anything. Why rub salt into the wound?

That night after dinner, Dylan went for a slow jog around the neighborhood. His bone had mended—it was the injured muscles and ligaments that still had a way to go. But he was healing. He was running farther, faster, and he no longer limped when his leg got tired.

He’d thought about calling Pat Michaels, his ex-partner, to see how things were going at the precinct, but hadn’t been able to bring himself to make the call. After the accident, he and Pat had naturally seen less of one another but he also had the strangest feeling that his partner was distancing himself from him and he didn’t know why. He hadn’t been culpable in the accident and he was unaware of being on the wrong side of any precinct politics, so he’d finally decided that something outside of the job was eating at Pat. It happened. It also made him hesitant to call.

Hell, his life in Montana was so far removed from his life in Lanesburg, maybe it was better to focus on the here and now instead of worrying about things he was no longer part of—at least for the time being. He’d bring himself up to speed once he got his medical clearance and sat for the detective exam. When he was back where he belonged.

* * *

DYLAN HAD KEPT HIMSELF busy in his office and the warehouse for several days after Marti's call. Not once did he mention Jolie's project, nor did she, even after booking two more artisans—a leatherworker and a woman who made picture frames. She was making progress, but she wanted to fill the front of the store with interesting items, make a statement, catch the eye as people came in and then keep them coming back when gift-giving occasions arose. No one was going to drive a few extra miles for a tiny selection of handcrafted goods. She needed more artisans.

When she walked into the bar that night, Jim raised a lazy hand to greet her and she could see that it had been a slow afternoon, which wasn't unusual for a Thursday. He poured them both seltzer water, as he usually did when they had downtime, and after putting her purse away, she perched on her stool near the edge of the bar.

"Probably not a big tip night," she said, nodding at the two patrons playing a game of pool.

"It'll be a sleeper," he agreed. He leaned his elbows on the bar opposite her. "So how's your big project coming?"

"I'm halfway there. I need just four more artists to have a respectable showing."

"I talked to Mac."

Jolie had her glass halfway to her lips then put it back down. She'd asked Jim about his brother's ironwork, but Jim hadn't been hopeful about Mac agreeing to participate. "And?"

"He said I can pull some of his stuff out of the garage and let you display it. I got you two wine racks and two towel bar sets."

"Oh, my gosh." Jolie practically jumped off the stool. Mac's wrought-iron work was gorgeous.

"And he's working with a guy whose brother just got out of prison at Deer Lodge. He hitches horsehair and has some belts he'd like to commission."

"Jim, you are a bona fide doll."

He went a little red. "I know."

Jolie's run of good luck continued for the next few days. On Saturday she heard back from a leatherworker who had spur straps and wallets to display and on Monday a silversmith finally returned her message and agreed to drop off twenty pieces of jewelry. She was so tempted to walk into Dylan's office and slap her list of artists on the desk in front of him, but she refrained. Partly because she was above that and partly because he'd been avoiding her, which made her believe he'd felt the same sense of tension building between them that she did.

During her lunch hour, Jolie walked the area near the front of the store where she wanted to build her display and debated about how best to squeeze in an attractive backdrop, *attractive* being the key word. The walls were painted flat white and the floor was half-century-old cracked tile. She didn't have a lot of time and her budget was very close to zero dollars. She would have to make do with what she could scrounge around the place.

She went back behind the counter, flipped open the notebook she used to jot down special orders and, after a moment, started sketching, trying to come up with a way to cover the walls, build shelving, disguise the floor—

The bell above the door rang and she jumped a mile. Dylan gave her an odd look as he crossed the room and she slowly closed the notebook.

"Did I interrupt something?" he asked curiously.

"No. I was just drawing."

"Drawing."

"Ideas for my display."

He stopped on the other side of the counter. "I take that to mean that you contracted your seven artisans?"

"I did. Now I'm going for ten."

"Can I see your plan?"

"I don't think so," Jolie said with an easy smile. It was beyond rough and she wasn't presenting any ideas to him until they were polished. She'd learned her lesson about that.

"Is it some big secret?"

"Maybe I don't want you taking over."

His eyebrows shot up as if he had no idea what she was talking about. "Why would I take over?"

Her lips twisted. *Really, Dylan?* "Because that's our history. You take over."

He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "This is your baby. I'm just curious in case Mike has questions."

There was something in his tone that caught her attention. "Will Mike have a problem with this?" She liked the gruff old guy and wouldn't want to upset him.

"Mike doesn't like change."

"At all?" Was that why Finn had also dragged his feet when she'd discussed improvements during the few weeks they'd worked together?

Dylan gave his head a slow shake. "Not a fan. It's gotten worse over the past few years."

"Then moving has got to be killing him."

"If the house didn't have so many damned stairs, he'd never leave."

"Well..." she said slowly, "can you convince him this will be a change for the better? After you convince yourself, of course."

He didn't deny that he had to be convinced, but she hadn't expected him to.

"How are you going to display this stuff when it comes in?" He leaned an elbow on the counter as he cast a sweeping glance around the store and again she had that feeling of being too close to him, even though there was a good two feet of wood and glass between them.

"I'll have to rearrange, but all of your stock will be easily available."

"Just run any big changes by me, okay?"

"Sure." She caught the scent of his aftershave and it made her want to lean even closer...maybe even follow him when he retreated to his office. That had never happened in high school. Had they been so busy sniping at each other in the lab that she'd never noticed that the guy was jangling her nerves?

No. Something had changed. They were still sniping...but it felt different. And even though Dylan was technically her boss, it didn't feel the way it did with Finn.

Maybe because of that fantasy comment he'd made?

Even though she told herself it was only a quip, meant to throw her off balance, it had stuck with her. As had the realization that Dylan had lips that could take part in a fantasy—hers—and that was...disconcerting.

She cleared her throat, bringing his attention back to her, which had not been her intent. She smiled at him, hating the feeling that she was somehow at a disadvantage because his very presence was making her feel all edgy and unsettled.

"You were going to say something?" he finally asked.

Instead of saying no, as she should have, Jolie decided to take control. "I was wondering if you have some kind of time frame in which you have to get back to your other job."

He blinked at her as if she was not making sense. Or as if he didn't want to answer that particular question. "Counting the days until I'm out of your hair?"

"Actually, no. I was just curious."

"As soon as Finn gets back, I'm heading home."

"You're on leave?" She leaned on the counter. He was withdrawing. Fast.

"Yes."

"Your old job waiting for you?"

"Pretty much."

She waited a moment. "Not going to share any details, are you?"

“Don’t really see any need to,” he said, his eyelids dropping an iota. He regarded her for a few long seconds, as if challenging her to ask yet another question he wasn’t going to answer.

She did love a challenge.

“What happened to your leg?”

“The windshield got shattered on my cruiser and I lost control and hit a power pole.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t expected a real answer, but before she could ask about the windshield, he raised his index finger in a warning gesture.

“Don’t ask, because I’m not answering.”

“All right then,” she finally said, pulling her papers closer and doing her best to ignore the sparks snapping between them. “I think it’s time to heat up my lunch.”

“Don’t let me keep you.” He gave a slight nod and headed for his lair.

Once he disappeared, Jolie shut her eyes and let out a short breath.

CHAPTER FIVE

DYLAN SHUT THE office door and tried to shake off the feeling that he’d just escaped. Ridiculous. He had work to do and he’d wasted too much time chitchatting with Jolie.

The office was a paper nightmare and he’d been slowly going through everything, one file at a time, deciding what was needed, what should be shredded and what could be simply trashed.

He hated paperwork—all cops hated paperwork except for the overachievers—but this seemed like a good time to make a few more inroads.

Over the course of the next hour, he filled two black garbage bags with stuff that shouldn’t have been kept in the first place: old calendars, advertisements, magazines, catalogs. It was as if Mike hadn’t thrown anything away in the past decade. Dylan couldn’t figure out why until it struck him that most of the collected junk was dated after 2005—the year Grandma, the keeper of the office, had passed away. Maybe Mike had given up after that. Maybe going through the accumulation after he’d stopped grieving had been too much. It’d obviously been too much for Finn, since he hadn’t tackled it.

Or maybe he hadn’t felt the need to hide out from his associate.

The thought came creeping out of nowhere and Dylan disregarded it almost as soon as it registered. He wasn’t hiding...he was just in his office, with the door closed and no intentions of coming out any time soon.

All right, he was hiding, but it wasn’t from Jolie. He was avoiding questions that he didn’t want to answer. Hell, he was avoiding questions he couldn’t answer because he didn’t *know* the answer. He’d never been one to run away from hard issues, but he didn’t want to discuss them with Jolie, and he really didn’t want to come right out and tell her to mind her own business. He sensed that, despite everything, she was honestly concerned about him on some level and it seemed cold, even for him, to tell her to back off.

And then there was the matter of the tension between them that they were both obviously aware of and both obviously ignoring. Something else he didn’t care to think about. But it was a big part of the reason he was in the office doing something that Finn could do when he came back.

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