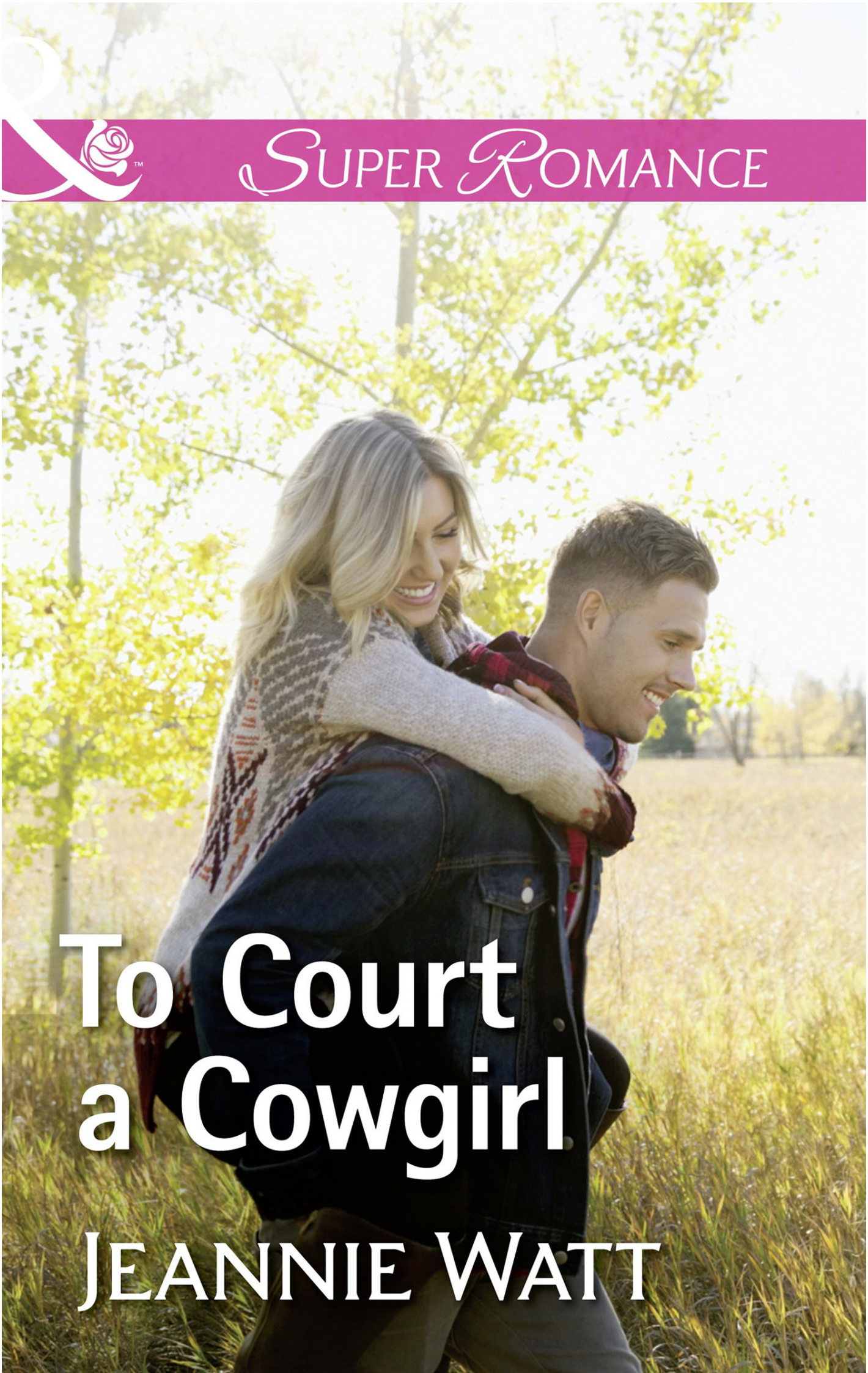

SUPER ROMANCE
To Court a Cowgirl
JEANNIE WATT

Jeannie Watt

To Court A Cowgirl

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Nothing can make her stay—not even JasonAllie Brody decided long ago to leave the Lightning Creek Ranch in the past. She’s lost too much there to want to call it home again. And coming back to help while her sister’s away won’t change her mind, either. Even if Jason Hudson makes her temporary visit more…palatable. As long as she sticks to short-term with the former pro-football player, what’s the harm in their attraction?It turns out everything is wrong with it. Helping each other only fogs Allie’s plans for a no-strings fling. Sure, Jason signed up to help Allie rebuild her broken ranch—but he’s determined to repair her heart, too. That's not on her agenda.

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Содержание

To Court a Cowgirl 6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 36

Nothing can make her stay—not even Jason

Allie Brody decided long ago to leave the Lightning Creek Ranch in the past. She's lost too much there to want to call it home again. And coming back to help while her sister's away won't change her mind, either. Even if Jason Hudson makes her temporary visit more…palatable. As long as she sticks to short-term with the former pro-football player, what's the harm in their attraction?

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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,

When I wrote The Brodys of Lightning Creek miniseries, I saved the eldest sister's story for last because, unlike her siblings, Allie Brody has no great love for the family ranch. She lost her father on the Lightning Creek and her marriage imploded there. She'd have been quite happy to never set foot on the property again, but, of course, she doesn't get her wish. I sent her home to make peace with the ranch and face her problems—one of which turns out to be her former high school nemesis, a recently retired professional football player who doesn't put up with Allie's prickly ways.

After retiring from professional sports, local football legend Jason Hudson quickly realizes that his athletic career has in no way prepared him for the next phase of his life. Despite this obstacle, he knows what he wants to do and he'll find a way to do it—just as soon as his difficult father convalesces from a heart attack and he's free to leave the Eagle Valley.

Allie and Jason had me going in circles for a time. They were two of the most stubborn characters I've ever created and it wasn't easy making them realize that their carved-in-stone attitudes and plans were not the best attitudes and plans. Now that I'm done, I love their story and their happily-ever-after, and I hope you enjoy it, too.

Best wishes,

Jeannie Watt

To Court a Cowgirl
Jeannie Watt


www.millsandboon.co.uk

JEANNIE WATT lives in Montana's beautiful Madison Valley, where she and her husband help manage the family cattle ranch. When she's not writing, Jeannie enjoys sewing, shopping for vintage patterns, reading and making mosaic mirrors. To find out more about Jeannie and her books, please visit her website at jeanniewatt.com.

Contents

COVER
BACK COVER TEXT
INTRODUCTION
Dear Reader
TITLE PAGE
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
EXTRACT
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CHAPTER ONE

"DAD, I'M NOT going to work for Uncle Jim." Jason Hudson didn't have all the answers regarding his immediate future, but he had not quit football to become a salesman. End of story.

"But Jimmy's your biggest fan," Max Hudson protested.

"I thought you were my biggest fan," Jason replied dryly.

"Immediate family notwithstanding." Max leaned forward in his chair, the Dobermans sleeping on either side of him each opening a sleepy eye as the recliner squeaked. "You haven't even talked to him. You wouldn't be selling," his father assured him. "You'd be managing."

Because he had so much experience in that. No, he'd be smiling and glad-handing the people that came in to see the curiosity. Him.

"My degree is in physical therapy."

"You have no experience with that, either." Jason cocked an eyebrow and his dad's mouth shifted sideways. "On the giving end, I mean. Let's visit this later, okay?"

"I'm not a sales guy." He was a former professional athlete heading into a new phase of his life earlier than expected. His original plan, subject to the whims of team management and performance stats, had been to play until he was up for free agency, but an injury-plagued season followed by his father's massive heart attack had changed that plan, and now here he was. Sitting in his dad's living room, being counseled on his future—which was not going to be in sales.

"You're staying in the area, though, right?"

"For now." He didn't want to stress his dad and trigger another heart attack, but he wanted to be as honest as he could. Max wanted him nearby—perhaps so that he had someone besides his daughter, and Jason's sister, Kate, to boss around, and in the long run that wasn't going to work out. Jason and his dad had a relationship that at times bordered on adversarial, but he couldn't imagine life without the old man, so he'd come home to help his sister care for him while plotting a course for the next phase of his life.

"Then contact Ray Largent. Ask him about that property down the street. It'll sell fast, since it overlooks the lake."

Jason smiled at his dad and got to his feet. The houses in their area were big and pricy and practically stacked one on top of the other. Not the way he liked to live. "I got a couple things to do. Kate's going to hang out with you."

"See Ray," his father called after him as he left the room.

Jason blew out a breath and grabbed his keys off the hook. Kate was due in fifteen minutes and his appointment with Ray Largent was in ten. According to the doctor, his dad didn't need a full-time caretaker but he did need someone close by, so Jason and Kate had decided that at least one of them would be there for the majority of the time. That didn't sit well with Max. He wanted his kids close. Very close. But not watching over him. No, he was supposed to be watching over them and since his illness, his need to intrude into their lives had increased markedly. Thus the visit to Ray, although not entirely for the reason his father had suggested. He wanted a property where he could disappear when he came back home; close enough to town to easily spend time with his dad, but not so close that they ended up at each other's throats. Like they always did.

Hopefully Ray could help him with that problem.

* * *

ALLIE BRODY NEVER in a zillion years imagined herself moving back to the Lightning Creek Ranch, yet here she was, lugging her suitcase up the front steps of her childhood home. The place where her father died, the place where her marriage imploded.

She should have her head examined.

No. She should toughen up. Her relationship with the Lightning Creek had never been easy, but it was time for her to make peace with the family ranch, especially since her little sisters were hell-bent on living there, or nearby in the case of Dani, whose husband owned the Staley house a mile to the north.

Allie set down her suitcase on the newly painted porch and dug out the key from her pocket —the same key her mother entrusted to her seventeen years ago, after her father's untimely death from a heart attack, when she'd become second in command of the family. She drew in a breath and pushed open the door.

The house had been practically empty when she'd moved out after her divorce two years ago —what her ex-husband, Kyle, hadn't claimed as his own she'd sold to help pay her college expenses —but her sisters Dani and Jolie had once again filled the rooms of the house with furniture and bric-a-brac. Well, Jolie more than Dani. Her middle sister had been quite comfortable with one chair and a bed, pouring her money into savings for the giant indoor arena that now stood next to the larger of their two barns. But now Dani was on the other side of the country and Jolie was on the other

side of the state. Mel, the second oldest of the four sisters, was in New Mexico, and Allie was right where she swore she would never be—on the ranch, trying to hold things together yet again until her sisters returned to take up the reins.

For a moment she stood near the door, wondering if she could do this.

Loss.

That was what this ranch, this house, represented to her. Deep and painful loss.

Allie put her hands to her temples. She was strong. She could do this. Take back this house. As she saw it, she had two choices—move into the Staley house and visit the ranch twice a day to feed and care for livestock, or man up, pour herself a shot of whiskey, toast the past and head into the future here. In this house. Her unwanted birthright. Her sisters had made peace with the ranch. In fact, they'd all thrived there. In the place where she'd lost her husband, they'd all three found theirs.

Allie walked into the kitchen, opened the cupboard next to the refrigerator and, sure enough, there was a bottle of Jameson right where she had left it during her brief Christmas visit. Her sisters were beer and wine women, but on the occasions she imbibed, she was whiskey all the way, and right now only one small thing stood between herself and toasting the past. A shot glass.

After a few minutes of futile searching, Allie reached for a water tumbler. A glass was a glass and all that really mattered was the amount of alcohol poured in. Granted, a toast to the future in a water glass lacked the panache of tossing back a shot, but one had to work with what was at hand.

She carried the bottle and glass into the living room and set them on the sideboard beneath one of her more colorful oil paintings—a painting that had been stored in the attic with several others until Jolie moved home. Truth be told, Allie wasn't wild about having her artwork back on the walls, but kept her mouth shut because she didn't live at the ranch permanently and her sisters viewed her artwork differently than she did. Maybe it was good to have it up—another way to face the past, acknowledge and move on.

She opened the bottle and had just started to pour when the sound of footsteps on the front porch startled her, causing her to slosh a healthy amount of liquid both into the glass and onto the table.

What the hell? Or rather who the hell?

The Lightning Creek was not on the road to anywhere, except for the vacant Staley house, so anyone who was at the ranch had come for a specific purpose. She only hoped it was a friendly one.

Allie set down the bottle and crossed the living room, tamping down stirrings of apprehension. She paused at the window to peer out through the crack between the curtains, then took a quick step back. The guy on her porch was, in a word, big. He also seemed oddly familiar, even though Allie was fairly certain she didn't know anyone that tall. Then it struck her.

Jason Hudson?

No. Way.

But when she peeked through the curtains again, it was indeed the hometown hero on the other side of her door. She'd just seen him on TV a few days ago in a campy commercial, doing the wide-receiver thing, catching pizzas thrown by his quarterback. So what was he doing on her porch?

It had to be a lost dog or something.

She unlocked the door and pulled it open, tilting her head back to meet Jason's gaze. He smiled at her. "Hi, Allie. Jason Hudson. I assume you remember me?"

She did. She remembered him using that crooked smile and charming expression to get pretty much anything he wanted after he and his wealthy California family had arrived in the Eagle Valley at the beginning of her junior year—including the valedictorian scholarship that should have been hers. She no longer held a grudge, but at the time she'd been outraged that when their GPAs had tied, he'd been given the top spot and she'd received salutatorian. She'd done a lot more extra curriculars...but he'd helped them win the state football championship. Sports topped good work.

"I do," she said. Who in this town didn't? Their big claim to fame—a professional football player. She took hold of the edge of the door as she gave him a once-over. He was taller than she remembered and solidly built, which was to be expected given his profession. He was also better looking than he'd been back in the day. His face had developed some fascinating planes and angles and his once blond hair had gone dark, which only seemed to make his eyes seem bluer. A charmer and a looker. Allie was no longer impressed by either description, but that didn't mean she wasn't affected by the guy's sheer masculinity. It was all she could do to keep from swallowing dryly.

"What can I do for you?"

He cocked his head. "Any chance I could talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Sure." She stepped back and let him come into the living room, figuring it was unlikely that a recently retired football player was there to do her bodily harm. Besides, they had once been in chess club together—not that he'd ever deigned to speak to her. They had traveled in different social spheres, with the exception of chess club.

"Nice place," he said, looking around.

She shrugged and said thank you, even if it was all her sisters' doing. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

"Your ranch, actually."

The first red flag popped up. "What about it?"

"I, uh..." He frowned a little as one corner of his mouth quirked. Allie followed his gaze straight to the glass with the splash of amber liquid in the bottom sitting in a puddle of whiskey next to the bottle itself. She looked back at him, raising an eyebrow, daring him to say something. Anything. Like "wow, that's a giant whiskey glass."

He did not. Not on the subject of the whiskey anyway. "I heard that you've recently considered selling the ranch."

Allie's chin slowly rose as her eyes narrowed. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Ray Largent."

Her insides went cold at the mention of her ex-father-in-law. "The ranch isn't for sale," she said abruptly. How many ways could her ex-in-laws come up with to try and get this place away from her? And how was Kyle going to cash in on this?

"I understand that."

"Then why are you here?" she asked, no longer caring about politeness or the fact that he was even hotter than he'd been back in the day.

"To let you know if you decided to sell, I'd be interested."

"All right," she said in a clipped voice. "If we decide to sell, I'll let you know."

"I appreciate that." He shifted his weight. The silence stretched, then he said, "I'm moving back to the Eagle Valley to be closer to the family. My dad had a pretty serious heart attack."

Was he making small talk or playing the sympathy card? Either way she wasn't biting.

"I'm certain you can find a suitable acreage to buy."

"No doubt. This ranch is close to Dad's place, but not too close, if you know what I mean."

Dad's place. One of those monstrosities overlooking the lake at the center of the valley. Allie lifted a shoulder. "Sorry. And not to be rude, but I was in the middle of something."

His eyes strayed to the bottle and Allie felt her color rise, even though she told herself she owed him no explanation. "Then I won't take up any more of your time."

She saw him to the door, closed it behind him, waited until she heard his car engine start before she headed back to her whiskey. After putting the stopper in the top, she took the bottle to the kitchen and resolutely stowed it away on the shelf. Then she returned to the living room, lifted the glass from the puddle and sipped the small amount of liquid in the glass—not as a toast to the past, but to still her nerves.

She didn't know what was going on here. How the Largents and the Hudsons were involved, but once again the Largents were after her ranch and she wasn't going to put up with it. And to send the golden boy...

She tossed back the rest of the whiskey.

* * *

"THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HOME." His sister, Kate, spoke in a low voice as Jason came in the back door. "I need someone to distract Dad."

Jason smiled even though he didn't feel much like smiling. There was something about his conversation with Allie Brody that stayed with him—something beyond being told no, the ranch wasn't for sale. "That's what you're here for."

Kate blew out a breath. "My life has just been thoroughly evaluated—for the third or fourth time this month. Your turn now."

"I already had my turn today."

"That you, JD?" his father called.

Kate gave him a push toward the living room. "Go and get counseled."

Jason went to the fridge and pulled out a beer. Paternal counseling, especially for the second time in one day, went down easier with alcohol. He popped the top, tilted the can at his sister with a wry smile and then headed to the living room. Behind him he heard the fridge door open again and another top popping.

"Hey, Dad."

"You were gone awhile. Any luck with Ray?"

Jason shook his head and sat on the leather sofa across from his dad's recliner. "He'll keep looking, though."

"What about the house around the corner that overlooks the lake?"

"I want something with more privacy."

Max frowned deeply as he sat in his recliner. "Maybe right now, but as time goes on, people are going to get used to having you around. They won't be gawking."

"I know," he said patiently. Once upon a time he and his dad triggered each other by merely walking into the room, but dealing with more than one megalomaniac coach had taught him a thing or two about thinking before reacting. "This is more about me wanting a place where I can have privacy because I like privacy."

His old man frowned, seemingly confused by the concept. "Since when?"

Always. He'd always liked privacy. Jason shrugged rather than giving an answer and took a pull on his beer.

"It's like I don't know you anymore."

Jason laughed at that. "Right."

Max leaned forward in his chair, resting his forearms on his knees. "What are your plans if you won't go to work for Jimmy? What will you do to fill your time?"

His father was of the school that believed if a person wasn't working, they were either going to become depressed or get into trouble. He had no concept of taking a few months off to let things fall into place. He'd never done that, so why should anyone else?

"I'm looking at options, Dad. Trust me—I'll come up with something."

"Here."

"For now."

Max narrowed his eyes and Jason met his father's stare dead-on. He wasn't going to lie. He'd stay here until Max was back on his feet and then he would start phase two of his life...although his dad was right about the fact that if Jason didn't find something to do during Max's convalescence, he was going to go stir-crazy.

"Wherever I land, it'll be close enough to come home for long weekends and such."

"I think you should talk to Jimmy."

"I'm not a salesman, Dad."

Max gave a snort. "It's getting late. I need to get to bed."

"Have you taken all your meds?"

Another sharp look. Max didn't like it when people tried to control his life, which was why Kate looked so tired.

"Yes." Max got up out of the chair, moving a bit slower than usual. Jason didn't like seeing that. He waited until he heard the bathroom door close before he went back into the kitchen, where Kate was just finishing her beer.

"Pop is going to turn us into alcoholics."

Jason smiled humorlessly as he took a seat across the table from his sister. "His own life is out of control, so he needs to control ours. Gives him a sense of security."

Kate eyed him darkly as she set the can on the table in front of her. "Thank you, Dr. Freud."

Jason shook his head and leaned back in his chair. "Tell the truth, you probably haven't done this much life analysis in a long time, have you?"

"Nope." She raised an eyebrow. "But I imagine you have."

"True." Making the decision to quit football hadn't been easy.

"No regrets?"

Jason shook his head. Eight good seasons were something to be proud of. "Other than having to find a job that doesn't involve Uncle Jimmy."

Kate regarded her hands for a moment before looking back up at him. "If you ever want to talk or anything, I'm here."

"Talk about what?" Jason asked cautiously.

"You're my brother. Football was your dream career since you were seven or eight. Your life. And now it's done. There's got to be some adjustments to be made."

There were definite adjustments, such as not having a goal front and center on every waking day. "Maybe a few," he admitted.

"I can't help but think about Pat."

Jason stared at his sister. "I'm not going to drive my car into a tree."

She let out an exasperated breath. "What I'm getting at is that the transition from professional ball to regular life will take some getting used to—especially if you don't have a job to slide into."

"I'll get a job." He gave Kate a sidelong look. "You aren't joining forces with Dad to get me to go to work for Jimmy?"

Kate smiled, but her heart wasn't in it. She was honestly worried. "No. But I remember how confident Pat was. And how high he set the bar for his postprofessional career."

Pat Madison, Jason's friend and football mentor, had indeed set the bar high for himself upon retiring from football three years before Jason. He'd fully expected to become a sports broadcaster. It hadn't happened. After that he'd set his sights on landing a job coaching for a major college or university and from there work his way into coaching in the pros. After a year with no offers and an increasing reliance on alcohol, he'd dropped his bar another notch and applied for an assistant athletic director job at the university where he and Jason had played football together. He'd assumed the job was his—he was an alumni and he'd had a successful football career. It wasn't. After the first round of interviews, he'd been dropped. A day later, on the second anniversary of his retirement, he'd driven his car into a tree.

"Are you still on this planet?" Kate asked softly.

Jason raised his gaze and decided his sister should know the truth. "Here's the thing. I haven't told Dad yet, but I'm trying to start where Pat gave up. I've been in contact with people at Brandt."

"Really?" Kate sounded surprised and pleased. She was also a Brandt University graduate and loved the place as much as Jason did.

"Really." And even being an alumni and an ex-pro, it would be a long shot, since he had no experience. Brandt was one of the top football colleges on the west coast and hired accordingly.

"Is it the same job that Pat—" Kate gave a small grimace "—applied for?"

"One notch lower. I figure it'll give me toehold and then I can work my way up."

Jason didn't mind the idea of growing his career slowly. His plans and dreams were different than Pat's. He'd enjoyed his status as a football player—a little too much at times—but he didn't need the limelight. He was an athlete, not a performer. Pat was both—or he had been until alcohol and the so-called accident had irrevocably altered his life.

"Well," Kate said, "I see some waves ahead where Pat's concerned, so my offer stands. If you need to talk, I'm here."

"Dad wants me to move in around the corner. Want to talk about that?"

Kate laughed. "He tried to get me to do that, too."

"That makes me feel better about saying no. But I did go talk to Ray Largent. He told me about a place that'd been for sale a while ago, but taken off the market. I took a trip out there this evening."

"Rather than staying home and taking a few hits for me?"

He shot his sister an amused look. "It was your turn and I didn't think it would take long. It didn't. I practically got frog-marched out the door."

Kate gave him an amused look. "Where?"

"The Lightning Creek Ranch."

Kate's eyebrows went up. "I didn't know that was ever for sale. Allie Brody just moved back so she could go to work for the elementary school. She's taking over for Tricia Kettle while she's on maternity leave." Kate wrinkled her forehead. "She frog-marched you off the place?"

"Pretty much and I don't know why."

"You didn't mention Ray's name, did you?"

Jason shrugged. "He's the guy that put me on to the place."

Kate rolled her eyes. "He's also her ex-father-in-law. And it was not an easy divorce from what I hear. Kyle tried to get a chunk of the ranch in the settlement and didn't."

"Well, shit." Jason rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, which was still a little stiff from his discussion with Max. "Maybe he could have told me that."

"Maybe he thought you knew."

"I don't know how." It'd been a while since he'd been home for more than a couple of days, and certainly not long enough to catch up on all the local goings-on. And, honestly, Allie Brody probably wouldn't have been a subject of conversation, even if Ray and his father had been business associates for years and Ray had been her father-in-law. In fact, when he thought about Allie all he could remember was a hot body, a lot of blond hair and an attitude that had smacked of smoldering resentment toward him after he'd bested her for valedictorian.

And it appeared that not much had changed there.

CHAPTER TWO

ALLIE WENT TO bed early after her confrontation with Jason Hudson, but she did not sleep. A wind blew in close to midnight, beating on the house and making the trees creak until the early hours of the morning. Allie finally fell asleep, only to have her alarm ring minutes after she'd dozed off. First day of work. No hitting the snooze.

Yawning, she left the house in her pajamas and coat to do her early morning chores, only to find a few random shingles scattered across the front porch. There were more shingles in the yard. And in the driveway.

Allie had a very bad feeling as she followed the shingles toward the small barn, hidden by the arena—the only building on the property that still had a shingled roof, as opposed to metal. She rounded the corner of the arena then stopped dead. The entire structure lay in a heap of boards, beams and trusses. So much for refurbishing the small barn when they could afford it.

Allie approached the destruction slowly, circling it as if it were a carcass, which in essence it was. It appeared that the roof had been totally lifted off and tossed to the side, twisting the building enough to bring it down. Then she saw the damage to Dani's arena, the canvas covering impaled by debris.

Allie pressed a hand to her forehead. Her first day of work and...this.

The ranch hated her.

The feeling was mutual.

As soon as she got into the house, she called the insurance agent and left a message, then showered and dressed for work, debating about whether she should move to the Staley house, with its stainless steel appliances and vaulted ceilings. No bad memories. No curses. Dani wouldn't care.

The ranch would win, but she'd probably be a lot happier.

* * *

OKAY, SO HIS dad didn't want a sitter and he had made that abundantly clear again this morning when Jason had asked him again about meds. Cool. Jason didn't want to be a sitter and that hadn't been his intention when he'd come home. But he also didn't want to fight with his dad about how he needed to take care of himself.

He glanced at his watch and continued jogging up the mountain, ignoring the sweat rolling down his back and the dull ache in his knee as he tried to shake off the early morning pissing match he'd just had with his father. Sweat helped. It always did. He might be done with football, but he couldn't imagine life without training. Or a schedule, which he currently lacked.

At least he had a goal. In fact, his entire life had been goal-oriented, as Kate had pointed out the night before. Becoming a professional football player had consumed him since he'd been six and a half, when his dad had first started taking him to games. He'd known then that he wanted to be one of those titans out on the field and even though he'd kept the goal to himself, he'd strived for it. Made smaller goals to achieve; goals that built on one another. Moving to Montana, where his dad had bought a construction company, hadn't helped, but he'd taken the small school to the state championship two years in a row. That had gotten him a scholarship to a powerhouse football school, and the rest had pretty much been history.

Truly history now.

Enter phase two of his life plan.

Jason slowed his steps as he reached the boundary fence to the Forest Service land, then turned to look out over the Eagle Valley. It was a beautiful little valley, stretching between two mountain ranges with a lake dead-center—a lake with a house on it that his father still wanted him to buy. There was a new resort on the far side of the valley—Timberline—where he'd promised his sister dinner. On the opposite side was the Lightning Creek Ranch, cozied up against the mountains with its broad pastures and fields insulating it from encroaching housing developments.

It would have been the perfect sanctuary, but as Ray had told him the day before, there were other places with acreage for sale. Just none as nicely situated as the Lightning Creek or as close.

Jason stretched for a minute, working through the kinks that were part of the territory after eight years of getting slammed to the ground, then slowly started jogging back down the mountain. What was he going to do with his future other than steer clear of Uncle Jimmy's dealership and keep an eye on his dad? Even while jogging the thought of a nebulous future made his stomach start to knot. Pretty soon he was going to have to either come up with some kind of plan or invest in antacid stock.

* * *

"I HOPE WE see you tomorrow," Mrs. Lynn, the school secretary, said with a speculative raise of her eyebrows when Allie turned in her key before going home after the first day of her long-term substitute-teaching contract. "I know things get a little wild in the library on kindergarten day."

"Couldn't keep me away," Allie assured her with a quick smile. It was, after all, a job, with a paycheck, and in truth, the lively kindergarten classes had barely fazed her—possibly because she'd

been mulling over the call she'd received from the insurance agent just before lunch. The collapsed barn had been underinsured, and while they would issue a check, it wouldn't come close to replacing the barn. The only good news was that the damage to the indoor arena was covered and they'd start to work on that claim immediately.

But despite the rough start and the insurance issues, Allie had a surprisingly stress-free day manning the school library. Classes came and went. Teachers, many of whom she already knew, stopped by to say hello and welcome her. She'd eaten lunch with her friend Liz Belfort, who taught second grade at the school, and caught up on the local news. It wasn't until it was time to head home that she started to feel the familiar stirrings of anxiety, and she knew it was because she fully expected to find a new disaster waiting for her on the Lightning Creek.

She gave a small snort as she drove out of the parking lot. She'd been conditioned to expect the worst there, just as her sister Mel had told her when she'd grudgingly volunteered to hold down the fort while Dani and Jolie were away. It was true. She drove into the driveway and instantly started scouting for fallen trees, escaped livestock, lightning strikes and floods.

Nothing, but she wasn't totally convinced that the ranch was done with her.

That evening, after finishing her evening chores and checking the pregnant cows, all of whom stubbornly refused to show any sign of calving, Allie poked around the remains of the small barn. It had been built in the 1960s and the wood wasn't weathered enough to be salvaged for reuse in offices and houses, which was a disappointment. At school she'd managed to convince herself that there might be some salvage potential to help pay the demolition costs, but no. Now, if the big barn blew down, that wood would be worth something—

Allie abruptly stopped the thought. The way her luck was going, the big barn would blow down. Best to focus on getting what was left of the small barn out of there and not wish for trouble in the form of salvageable boards.

* * *

EVEN THOUGH JASON had come home to be near his father, and even though he was immensely grateful that his dad was still alive, they'd already begun to slip into their old roles. Jason managed to keep his mouth shut in situations that would have triggered him in his teens, but he felt his patience beginning to wear thin. He and Max made a daily walk around the neighborhood, with his dad's two monster Dobermans leading the way. On every walk Max directed the conversation to Jason's future and the possibility of him working for Jim, no matter how many times he tried to steer it away. Finally, on a blustery Wednesday morning jaunt, Jason stopped walking, turned to his dad and bluntly asked him what the deal was. Why was he so hell-bent on Jason going to work for family?

"Because business is flagging and you could help. And I don't think it would kill you to do that."

For a moment Jason stared at Max. "I thought you were concerned about my future."

"I am. And my brother's, too."

Jason propped his hands on his hips and stared up at the sky. Then he looked back at his dad. "You want me to do a job I don't want to do in order to draw in business?"

Max gave him an openhanded duh gesture. "For the family."

Jason just shook his head and started walking. "I need to think on this."

Max started after him and Jason slowed his steps until his dad caught up, so that he wouldn't tax his father's heart.

"JD." Jason turned and stopped, hoping his dad was going to say something sane. Instead he said, "Jimmy's already got an ad campaign planned."

"Without asking me?"

Max shrugged a shoulder. "You do the pizza ads, so we figured he could tie into that."

"How?"

"We have this Jaromek look-alike—" Jason rolled his eyes at his former quarterback's name "—and he's going to throw car keys and—"

"I'm going to catch them?" As if that wasn't a lawsuit waiting to happen. Maybe if someone else parodied the commercials, they'd get away with it, but he'd starred in the damned things. "No, Dad."

"Look. You might have been the big man on campus for a lot of years, but you're home now and you need to start looking out for your own."

Again Jason stared at his father, unable to find words. Finally he said, "Let's talk about this later." Because if he didn't wait until his rising temper cooled, he'd say something he regretted. "Let's head home."

The Dobermans understood the word home and immediately reversed course. Max didn't say a word on the way back, and Jason didn't try to make conversation. It was a tense half-mile walk and once they arrived, Jason went upstairs to take a shower. When he finished, his dad was watching television, the big dogs curled up on either side of his chair.

"Hey," Max said as he walked down the hall.

"Yeah?" Jason asked, fully expecting phase two of the battle.

"Kate forgot to buy dog food. Could you pick some up while you're out? Wildland brand."

"Will do," Jason said, glad to have a chance to make an escape. He still needed some time to work through this owing-the-family stuff. Jimmy was well able to take care of himself and if the business was flagging, it was because of him. People were still buying cars, but his uncle, quite frankly, was a manipulator. He scattered pennies in the parking lot so that people shopping for cars would think it was their lucky day. He wasn't above pretending there were bogus problems with the cars people brought to trade in. In short, his uncle was shady in his business practices and he was not going to help the guy out. It was bad enough he was related to him. And honestly? He was pissed that his father expected him to do just that, in the name of family.

With his jaw muscles aching, he got into his truck and drove to the grocery store, only to discover that they didn't carry Wildland food. He had to go to Culver Ranch and Feed. Fine. He started back to his truck, stopping abruptly to let a car pass in front of him. He recognized the driver in an instant, even raised a hand, but Allie Brody looked through him as if he didn't exist.

And for some reason, that pissed him off even further.

He marched to his truck and took off for the feed store, wondering if he could fit in another run that day to take off some of the stress. At the light, he caught up with Allie's car. He saw her glance up at him in her rearview mirror before fixing her gaze forward again. She turned the corner, drove another mile, then turned into Culver Ranch and Feed.

Good. He had a word or two for Allie.

The lot was almost empty, but he purposely parked right beside her. She got out of the car and walked into the store. He followed, stopping just inside the door to get his bearings.

"Can I help you?" the lady behind the counter called as he caught sight of Allie to his left, tacking something to the bulletin board.

"No thanks," he said. Allie's head came up at the sound of his voice, but she didn't move away from the board. He closed the distance between them, stopping a few feet in front of her. "Have I done something to offend you?"

Allie met his gaze dead-on, her expression cool as she said, "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know...maybe the way you practically ran over my feet at the Food Mart parking lot and the way you're looking at me now."

"I didn't practically run over your feet and I don't think there's anything wrong with the way I'm looking at you."

"Right," he said flatly.

She gave an impatient snort. "Maybe you need to understand that not everyone is a fan."

"Hey," he said, taking a step closer and feeling a touch of satisfaction when her blue eyes widened an iota—not as if she were threatened, but instead as if she were suddenly aware that he was

going to continue the conversation instead of accepting the brush-off. “I don’t deserve that. I never asked you to be a fan. I asked if I’d offended you.”

She folded her arms and seemed to consider his question for a moment. “Let me put it this way. You’re the second rich guy who’s tried to buy my ranch. I resent people traipsing to my front door, offering cash and assuming we’re going to fall all over ourselves to sell our family heritage.”

“Who was the other guy?”

Allie’s gaze shifted and then she said, “None of your business.”

“Is this because of Ray Largent? Because for the record, I had no idea that Ray was your ex-father-in-law. I came because I heard the ranch had once been for sale. End of story.”

“It wasn’t entirely your connection to Ray that put me off.”

“Then what?”

She sucked in a breath, her expression bordering on stubborn as she obviously fought to find a reason for her animosity. “Maybe it’s because things are easy for you. So easy that you can simply point to what you want and pull out your wallet.”

“What?”

She was starting to get warmed up. She pointed a finger at him. “Even in high school, whatever you wanted, you pretty much got.”

He looked at her incredulously. “This isn’t about that freaking scholarship, is it?”

“No,” she muttered. “Although I could have used that money. You had money.”

“Sounds like it’s about the scholarship.”

She rolled her eyes as if he were dense. “No. It’s about privilege and general principles. About paying dues.” She unfolded her arms and took a few steps closer so that they were now only inches apart, so close that he could smell her light floral perfume. “What hasn’t come easily to you, Jason?”

“My career. I worked my ass off for that.”

“How about off field, where most people live their lives?” She nodded at his tricked-out truck, clearly visible through the front windows of the store. “Did you have to save for a down payment?”

“You resent that I make money?”

“Playing a game. A lot of us have to scramble to get by and you got paid a huge amount of money to play a game.”

“You’re pretty damned judgmental.”

“I know, but it doesn’t change facts. Some of us have to work for what we get—at a real job—and others get things because of who they are. Or were. Well, guess what? You aren’t getting my ranch.”

“Guess what? I don’t want your ranch.”

“Good.” She smiled tightly at him and when he gave no response, she pushed by him and headed for the door.

Jason let out a breath and ran a hand over the side of his head. The lady behind the counter sent him an odd look and he turned to face the bulletin board. There in front of him was the notice Allie had tacked up.

Wanted: handyman to tear down building, remove debris.

Without a second thought Jason pulled the advertisement off the board, crumpled it up and jammed it into his pocket.

CHAPTER THREE

ALLIE COULDN’T PUSH the feed-store face-off with Jason Hudson out of her brain, even though she gave it a mighty try. She was not normally confrontational. She left that for Dani and Jolie. She was more of the peacemaker, a retreat-into-the-background kind of person. But today she’d been part of a spectacle in the ranch store. Like it or not, Jason triggered her temper. And she had to face that sad fact that she did harbor resentment against the guy. Why? Because his family was wealthy?

Because he'd gotten what she wanted? Because he'd tried to buy the ranch by nonchalantly walking up to her door with more cash at his disposal than she'd ever seen?

The phone rang as she finished washing her few dishes and she practically pounced on it when she saw Mel's number on the display. Her second sister and her husband lived on a remote New Mexico ranch and rarely called unless they were in town, where they got decent phone reception.

"Hey," she said without waiting for a hello. "Back in civilization?"

"Hi, Allie."

She sat up straighter at the sound of her brother-in-law KC's voice. "What's wrong?"

"Mel. She's okay, but she had a bad run-in with a mama cow. Put her over the fence and she broke an ankle, bruised her ribs when she fell on the other side."

"Oh, my gosh." Allie pressed a hand to her chest.

"Damned Charolais," KC muttered. "I told my boss we needed to let a few of these meaner cows go. Maybe he'll listen to me now."

"When can I talk to Mel?"

"I'll have her call you later. She's a little loopy on the pain meds right now and worried about not doing her part during calving."

"But she's okay?" Allie asked, needing to hear it one more time.

"She's fine." But she could hear the stress in KC's voice. "But that's the last time she's checking the cows alone."

"I'll add my voice to yours," Allie said. Even though she was going to do exactly the same thing tonight and every other night for the next several weeks until all of the Lightning Creek calves hit the ground. Their cows were Angus, and all pretty mellow, but a cow with a calf was unpredictable.

"What about you?" he asked, keying into her thoughts. "Do you have any help?"

"I'll call the vet if there's any problems." Even though it was expensive. Living alone, she couldn't risk being hurt. "Promise," she said when nothing but silence met her statement.

"All right then," KC said gruffly.

She hung up the phone after a few more minutes of conversation and then rubbed her forehead. Mel was good with cattle, but things like this happened on ranches and considering her luck on the Lightning Creek...no, she wasn't going to consider that.

Mel called a few hours later, explained to Allie how the accident had been a fluke. She'd expected the cow to charge her, had actually planned to go over the fence, but had caught her boot on the way over and fell end-over-teakettle, landing on a pile of irrigation pipe.

"I need to get less cumbersome boots," Mel explained.

"Right." But Allie smiled, glad that her sister sounded as if she were in good spirits.

"And KC said you promised to call the vet if any calves need to be pulled."

"I will."

"There's a reason there's a ranch fund, you know."

And she and Kyle were the reason that the ranch fund was so low. "Speaking of which, we had a windstorm..." Allie went on about the storm, wondering why it was that when her sisters were there, the fund grew slowly but surely, and when she was there, it shrank. It was starting to give her a complex.

"Keep me posted," Mel said, sounding as if she were glad to have something to think about other than her ankle, which was going to keep her in the house for a lot longer than she wanted. "How's the job?"

Not what she expected. "Let's just say teaching high school art and managing an elementary library are worlds apart," she said dryly. She was a little surprised by the fact that she didn't feel more satisfaction at the end of the day. She enjoyed the kids and the staff, but when she walked out the door, she felt as if she needed...more.

"Hang in there," Mel said.

"Will do. Get some rest," Allie said. "And let me know when you leave for the ranch."

* * *

JASON SPENT THREE days driving around with Ray Largent, looking at properties with acreage, before finding eighty acres butted up against Forest Service land on one side and a giant ranch on the other. It was close to what he'd been looking for, only a fifteen-minute drive from his dad's house, yet it gave him privacy. Granted, it was smaller than he wanted, and overpriced, but at least it was one option to consider. Ray encouraged him to make an offer soon, but Jason had done his homework and knew that the property had been on the market for close to a year. Odds were that he didn't need to make a snap decision.

He headed home to what was supposed to be an empty house, since Kate had agreed to take their father to his weekly checkup, only to find an unfamiliar Lexus parked in the front yard. A moment later Jimmy got out and Jason swallowed a groan. Jimmy's name had not come up for a couple of days and Jason was beginning to hope the matter was closed.

"Hey, JD!" His uncle clapped him on the shoulder.

"Jim." Jason clapped him back, then put up his hands in a defensive stance when his uncle threw a couple of fake jabs at him. "It's been a while," he said when his uncle finally quit punching.

"Sure has. Wish we could have seen you here at home more often, but I know how it is."

"Want to come in for a beer?" Jason asked. He'd always liked his uncle, but he also saw him exactly for what he was. An opportunist. Jimmy had made a lot of money being an opportunist, on top of what he'd inherited, but according to Kate he had invested poorly and lately had seen diminishing returns. But he hadn't yet stopped living the high life.

"A beer sounds great."

Jason led the way into the house through the garage door, waved Jimmy to a seat in the great room and got a couple of beers out of the fridge and opened them.

"So how did Jaromek take your retirement?" Jimmy asked as he took his beer. "You guys were a team for a long time."

"He understood and Littleton was ready to step in and take my place, so I think it'll all work out. Plus they have O'Donnell."

"He's over that foot injury?"

"Should be a hundred percent by minicamp."

They continued to talk football, segueing from the pros to the local team and Jason started to relax, wondering if this whole work-for-Jimmy plan was something his father had cooked up for reasons of his own...reasons Jason couldn't begin to guess at. They debated the merits of veteran coaches entrenched in their ways versus new coaches with little experience but lots of ideas, then Jason offered his uncle another beer. Jimmy waved it off.

"Actually, I came by to talk to you about going to work at the dealership."

Jason's stomach lurched. "I—"

Jimmy held up a hand, stopping him. "I heard you had reservations because you have no experience in sales."

"I have reservations because sales aren't my thing."

"Your thing." His uncle blinked at him. "Is money your thing? Because looking at statistics, a lot of retired pro players are broke after a couple of years."

Jason's expression went stony. "I don't plan on being one of those guys."

"So what are you going to do?" There was a touch of belligerence in his uncle's voice. "I can give you a damned good job and you wouldn't have to work that hard."

"Why is it so important that I work for you?" Jason asked, thinking he may as well hear the reason spoken out loud.

"Because we can help one another," Jimmy said earnestly. "A symbiotic relationship. Your name, my expertise in sales."

"I can't."

"Can't?"

"Won't," Jason said coldly.

"I need your help. How can you turn down family?"

"I can loan you money."

Jimmy's lip curled. "I don't want a frigging loan."

"That's all I can offer."

"You won't help me?"

Jason gave his head a slow shake. "Not in the way you want."

"Look. Kid. Your career was already on the skids when you quit. If you think you're going to get any major endorsements or anything, you're wrong."

"I don't."

"So, what? You're going to live here with your father?" He sneered a little as he spoke.

"Until he feels better." Jason got up out of his chair, towering over his uncle. "And I don't want him to get upset." He gestured toward the door with his head. "Finding the two of us here, going at it, won't be good for his heart."

"Neither will your being a selfish prick."

The sound of the garage door going up caught both their attentions. Jimmy sent Jason a look he couldn't read, then a moment later, Max came into the house.

"So did you talk?" his father asked.

And that was when Jason knew he'd been set up. "We talked. The answer is no."

"It's no, no, a thousand times no," Jimmy said sarcastically. "He can crawl to me and I wouldn't hire him now."

Max looked from his son to his brother and back at his son again. "Maybe if the three of us sit down—"

"That's it," Jason said. "Is Kate here?"

"Feeding the dogs."

"Cool. Dad, I'll see you later. Jim..." His mouth tightened and then he walked through the garage door to where his sister was feeding the Dobermans. She took one look at him and shook her head grimly.

"Get out of here for a while," she said. "I'll call if anything happens."

He started to say no, then thought better of it. "Thanks."

* * *

THREE DAYS HAD passed since posting her advertisements in all the usual places, and Allie hadn't received one phone call. If she had to hire a salvage company instead of a local guy, it was going to cost more than she was ready to pay, but short of tearing down the barn herself, she didn't know what her other options might be. She'd give it another week, then call Dani and Jolie and explain that they were going to have to dip into the ranch fund to get rid of the thing.

Allie finished her coffee and headed outside to check the pregnant cows. They'd had only five cows when she and Kyle had left the ranch, down from almost a hundred. It seemed as if every few months they'd had to sell off animals to make ends meet or to fund one of Kyle's harebrained projects that she'd been so supportive of...until she finally figured out that her husband was all show and no go. Her sisters had started building the herd again and they were now up to twenty registered Angus cows—eighteen of which were pregnant. If she had a one-hundred-percent calving rate, then they would have even more of a hedge against disaster. She felt bad that she was the reason the ranch had been in such poor shape to begin with...which was why she really hated making that call.

After checking the cows, she turned the goats loose to eat weeds, then started back to the house, only to stop when she spotted the cloud of dust coming down the driveway.

And a second later she recognized the fancy pickup making the cloud.

Jason Hudson.

Allie glanced down at her clothing, glad that she hadn't succumbed to the urge to feed in her pajamas. Her oldest jeans, a ratty T-shirt and her hair pulled back in a rough ponytail weren't much better, but at least she could maintain a semblance of dignity that flannel pants with polar bears on them didn't allow.

The truck rolled to a stop a few feet away from where Allie stood near the barn. She shifted her weight, her arms hanging loosely by her sides as Jason got out of the truck.

"You're back," she said before he could speak.

"I am." In the late-afternoon sunlight, his eyes were the most amazing clear aqua blue. Caribbean Sea–blue. He gave a slight shrug and said, "I'm here about the job."

"Why?" The word burst out of her mouth.

"Maybe I need to pay my dues," he said without one hint of irony.

"You aren't paying your dues here." She gave a soft snort. "Why would you want to pay your dues here?"

"It seems as good a place as any." A few seconds of charged silence ticked by as Allie waited for Jason to either expand on his answer or leave. He did neither. Finally she gave up and shook her head. "I don't see this happening."

"Because you have so many applicants to choose from?"

"Yes. Exactly." Allie felt color start to rise in her face. She was an awful liar.

"I stole your advertisement off the feed-store bulletin board." Her jaw literally dropped. "Heat of the moment," he continued. "And now I'm here to either tear down your barn or put up another advertisement."

She studied him, wondering if he'd been hit in the head too many times, although there was nothing foggy in the way he was studying her back. He looked like a guy on a mission. Why would he want to tear down a barn when he probably had a whole lot of money sitting in the bank, drawing interest?

"You can't tear down my barn, so I guess I'd better print out another advertisement."

"I think you should at least give me a shot."

Allie blinked at him. "At the risk of repeating myself, why?"

"I need gainful employment."

"Jason, no offense, but can't you catch pizzas or something more in line with your talents?"

"I could catch pizzas if I were still playing ball," he said. "But not many companies want an ex-player as a spokesperson unless they were truly great. I wasn't."

There was something in the unflinching way he assessed his career that touched her. She quickly brushed the feeling aside. "Have you ever torn down a barn?" Or swung a hammer? His father had owned a construction company, but as far as she knew, Jason had never been involved in anything except for sports.

"No. I figure it's all a matter of logic. Start from the top and work down and from the outside in. One piece at a time."

Again there was something in his honesty that tugged at her. He didn't know how to tear down a barn, and he didn't pretend he did.

"Do you have the equipment necessary to do that job? And to haul away the debris?"

"I have contacts."

She bet he did.

"Here's the deal," he said, tilting his head as he held her gaze. "My dad had a heart attack and almost died. I came home, but if we continue to live in close quarters, he's very liable to have another because I won't let him take over my life. I need to be close for the next couple of months in case of emergency, but I also need something to fill my time. Something where I can just..." He shrugged.

Be alone with his thoughts, work through stress. Allie could have finished that sentence for him because she knew the feeling well.

"...do something physical."

For a moment common sense battled with empathy. She needed the barn hauled away and Jason honestly looked like he needed the job, for reasons other than the money, but this was Jason Hudson. Did she want him on the property, putting her on edge? Because that was what the guy did. He put her fully on edge. On the other hand, the feed-store advertisement he'd taken was one of many, and not one of the ads had produced results.

"One-day trial," she finally said. "And you have to sign an agreement releasing me from indemnity if you happen to hurt yourself. And I only pay minimum wage."

His expression didn't change. "I don't know how much I can get done in a day."

"If I'm not unhappy, we'll talk about another." He raised an eyebrow and she said, "I don't like commitment. Take it or leave it."

She expected him to leave it, but the half smile, which in turn triggered a slow warming sensation in her, told her he wasn't going to leave it. "Don't try to charm me," she warned.

"Into what?"

Bed was the first word that popped into her head. He'd probably charmed a number of women into bed. "Anything," she said with a snap.

"You got it. No charm. When do I start?"

"Tomorrow," she said matter-of-factly.

"Sure thing. I'll go find some tools."

"And I'll find those agreements."

CHAPTER FOUR

JASON PULLED INTO the family driveway hoping Kate didn't walk out in a frustrated huff as he walked in. He wanted a little backup when he told the old man about his new "job." Max was getting stronger every day and had made it clear that he no longer required a sitter. As long as someone was with him when he took his walks—which Jason intended to keep doing—Max didn't mind some time alone. But that didn't mean he didn't want Jason on call.

After he broke the news to his dad, he needed to buy some work clothes and gloves. Boots. And a hard hat. It would be ironic to have spent years in a physical occupation and then get taken out by a falling board or beam.

Except he was pretty certain Allie would laugh her ass off.

Let her. Safety first and all that.

Jason pocketed his keys as he walked into the house. "Hey, Dad. Ready for the walk?"

The dogs jumped to their feet. "Yeah." Max pushed himself out of his chair. "You've been gone awhile."

"I, uh, took a temporary job."

"Doing what?"

"I'm tearing down a barn for Allie Brody."

"I'm not even going to ask how this came about," he said, grabbing his Vandals cap off the sideboard. He sounded so disgusted that Jason had to fight the urge to laugh. Yes, he was turning out to be quite a disappointment now that he was no longer ripping up the gridiron "Have you ever torn down a barn?"

"No."

Max simply shook his head and headed for the door, the dogs on his heels. He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "Are you still living here?"

"Until I buy a place...if that's okay with you."

Max nodded and pulled the door open, but Jason had the distinct feeling that the wheels were turning in his head.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING when Jason showed up at the ranch wearing his new boots, with his new gloves stuffed in his back pocket and the tools he'd borrowed from his dad riding in the back of the truck, Allie was sitting on the porch with a mug of coffee cupped in both hands. As he walked up the path, her gaze traveled over his squeaky clean new work clothes, making him glad he'd left his hard hat in the truck. "You look well outfitted," she commented.

"I'm hoping to be here for more than one day."

"We'll see," she said, picking up a folder of papers sitting beside her. "I just need some signatures."

Jason signed and then she gestured at the collapsed barn. "Have at it. I'll be back from work by four. Do you need anything?"

"I don't think so."

Allie drove away not long after, leaving Jason to analyze the structure he was about to disassemble. It'd fallen into a heap after the roof had blown off, and the easiest thing to do would be to dismantle the roof, which lay several yards away in a crumpled mound. His dad had offered to send equipment and operators to dispose of the barn in a day or two, but Jason thanked him and said no. The purpose of his temporary job was to have something to do with his hands as he thought. Watching a guy bash the building with a front-end loader wasn't going to be the same.

Jason went back to the truck, put on the hard hat, grabbed a crowbar and hammer and set off across the field to where the roof had landed. After circling the thing, he chose a place to start prying wood away from wood and began the dismantling process. Within a few hours, his shirt was soaked from the unseasonably hot May weather and he was getting hungry. He had a nice pile of salvageable two-by-fours, a pile of scrap, a bucket full of old nails...and a whole lot of work ahead of him. He ate while sitting on the tailgate of his truck, studying the ranch. All the buildings had been reroofed recently and most of the buildings had been freshly painted, with the exception of the big barn. There was a large building next to the big barn, canvas stretched over ribs, which had been damaged by debris from the building he was working on. Curious about what was inside, he opened the man door on his way back to the demolition site. There was sand inside. A lot of it. And judging from the barrels stowed in one corner and the tack hanging from the wall, the thing was some kind of a horse arena.

Did Allie ride?

He sorted through what he knew about her and came up with very little other than tying for valedictorian and both belonging to chess club. Not that she ever spoke to him there—not even when they played. They'd pretty much coexisted at Eagle Valley High without a lot of interaction. But he'd known who she was. Thought she was attractive in a cool and distant sort of way. She still was attractive, but he saw now that cool and distant hid a rather prickly personality.

What made Allie Brody so prickly?

Did he care to find out?

Better question—did he dare to find out? Allie was kind of scary.

Jason went back to work, putting in his hours without a break until Allie's little white car turned into the ranch driveway. Then he grabbed the only tools he'd used that day—the crowbar and hammer—and headed back to his truck as Allie got out of the car. She shaded her eyes as he approached, a smile tugging at her lips. An amused smile. And then he realized he was wearing the hard hat.

"Once you get used to wearing a helmet, it's hard to go without," he said as he approached.

"I think legally you're supposed to wear a hard hat."

"There's that, too."

She started walking toward the rubble and he fell into step beside her as she passed the collapsed main building and walked to the roof, where she stopped to silently study his progress.

"This will take a while." She nudged a truss with the toe of her shoe.

"I can haul in the big equipment. Just say the word." Inwardly he was fairly certain she wouldn't say that word. She was doing this to save money.

"No. It looks like you got a good start." She brushed her hand over her cheek as if to push her hair back from her face, even though there'd been no hair in her face, and tilted her chin up to look him in the eye. "We'll give it another day."

He let out a soft snort. "Another day."

She nodded as if working day-to-day on approval was a normal business practice.

"I assume then that you'll be paying me daily?"

Her eyebrows lifted as if she hadn't considered that. "That does make sense," she said slowly. "Will you take a check?"

He exhaled. "Yes...you can pay me for two days tomorrow. Unless, of course, you wanted to go wild and hire me for an entire week."

"Do you think it will take that long?"

He was about to explain to her exactly how long he thought it would take when he realized that she was kidding. "Why the day-to-day bit, Allie?"

"So I don't overspend."

"You're just going to shut down demolition when you hit the end of your budget?"

"Something like that. I can't afford to go into debt. Not when I have student loans."

"You're paying for this yourself?"

Her expression started to frost over. He was edging too close to personal. "Never mind. If you want to work day-to-day, fine by me. You can pay me at the end of the time."

"I made up a time sheet."

"Of course you did."

She shot him a look, which he met with an innocent look of his own.

This was kind of fun.

* * *

ALLIE WAITED UNTIL Jason had driven away before checking on her stubborn calfless cows and found to her surprise that calf number one had been born. The adorable little black heifer peeked at Allie from the safe side of her mother, who was placidly grazing near the edge of the herd, so Allie assumed that all was well.

"See that?" she called to the other cows. "That's what I want to see—healthy calves on the ground when I get home from work."

Talking to the cows. No sign of insanity there.

Allie grimaced as she headed back to the car to get her purse. After the wild day in the library, staying home and talking to cows didn't seem like a bad idea.

Be grateful that you have a job.

Allie was grateful, which made it all the more difficult to deal with the growing doubts she had about whether she'd trained for the right career. One week in and, while she enjoyed parts of her temporary job, she was becoming painfully aware of her shortcomings as a future elementary-level teacher. She liked little kids, found them entertaining and charming, but she had no experience managing them and no natural talent in that arena. High school kids...they were different. After completing a double major in elementary education and secondary art, she'd done her practicum teaching in high school, where she'd had no problem with discipline. Smaller children... Dani and Jolie would laugh their asses off if they knew that she was being taken advantage of by six-year-olds. Oh, they'd started off sweet and shy, like new puppies, then, the next thing she knew, they were practically chewing on her shoes.

Allie pulled her purse out of the car and shut the door again. She'd get better at managing the kids as time went on. If her friend Liz could do it, so could she. She just needed practice holding the

hard line and ignoring the cuteness factor. Or pray that the impossible happened and the high school art teacher quit, something Liz assured her wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

The next morning Jason showed up early, just as she'd stepped out of the shower. Jolie had taken her dog with her, so Allie had no warning system, and she might have to rectify that. She'd only known that Jason had arrived because she'd happened to glance out the window and noticed his truck was parked near the arena, at least an hour earlier than he'd arrived the day before.

He was at the back, unloading a bucket of tools, and Allie leaned forward to get a better view. The guy was something, she'd give him that. She wondered how long he'd continue on her job before he'd had enough thinking time and moved on to pizza catching.

Allie's mouth quirked as she turned away from the window. That hadn't been a nice thing to say, but he hadn't taken offense. In fact, Jason Hudson seemed like a patient guy in general. She'd never sensed that about him before.

Yeah, in all the many minutes they spent together.

Even their chess games had been relatively quick. And, if she recalled correctly, they'd tied there, too. Not the games themselves, but the number of wins.

Allie put on a summery dress and cardigan, pulled her damp hair into a loose knot, slipped into flats and headed out to feed her cows.

"Remember," she said to the ladies, "healthy calves on the ground when I get home."

Then she looked over her shoulder to make certain that Jason was indeed where he was supposed to be and not witnessing her cow conversation. Another reason she needed to get a dog. Talking to dogs was socially acceptable.

* * *

ALLIE LEFT A little earlier than she had the day before, stopping just long enough to say a cool hello before heading off to her job at the school. Jason watched her car until it turned onto the road, then tossed a two-by-four in a pile a little harder than necessary. If he hadn't been working today he would have been running—straight up the mountain. His dad was driving him crazy and his former teammate Pat wasn't helping matters.

Jason had gotten home yesterday to find his sister one step away from throttling their old man. Jason had stepped in to referee and the fight had shifted to him. It was so hard to hold his tongue as Max outlined all of his usual gripes, but he managed. Barely.

Once Max had stomped off to his bedroom, Jason and Kate had had a summit. They decided that Max was still working on facing his own mortality and that they should give him a little more time to come to terms with his current life situation. In other words, they gave him a pass. But the passes weren't going to last long if he continued the controlling, demanding behavior.

In the morning his father was back at it, trying to pick a fight about Jason not being available for his walks. Jason hadn't reacted, but his jaw had been clenched tightly by the time he got to his truck. Then to top things off, he'd received a text from Pat, whom he hadn't heard from in weeks. It'd been short and to the point—was Jason applying to Brandt?

The "for the job I didn't get" went unsaid.

Jason texted back, saying that if he had an opportunity to apply, he would, but that the job hadn't officially opened yet.

Pat never responded, which concerned Jason on one level and irritated him on another. Not once had Pat confided in him during his downward spiral. He'd never reached out for any kind of help and when Jason had tried to express his concern, offer support, Pat had turned away. Now he resented Jason for having legs.

Another two-by-four hit the pile with a clatter and Jason realized that he had the perfect job in which to take out his frustrations. Easier than running up a mountain, and almost as satisfying.

* * *

ALLIE HAD JUST unlocked the library and snapped on the lights when the door behind her opened.

"Sorry to be here so early," Liz said without fully meeting Allie's eyes. "I need to find a couple of books on butterflies for my science lesson today."

"What's wrong?" Allie asked before her friend could brush by her. Something was definitely wrong. Liz's usually perfect hair wasn't so perfect and there were dark circles under her eyes.

Liz hesitated, then let out a shaky sigh. "It's Zach." She sank down into one of the tiny chairs next to the kindergarten table as if no longer able to support herself. "He rolled in at four o'clock this morning. I was worried sick about him, so now that he's home safely, I'm furious."

"Of course you are."

"And I blame Derek as much as I blame Zach."

Allie sat in the small chair on the other side of the table. She reached out and touched Liz's hand. Liz and her husband had broken up less than a year ago and their high-school-age son, Zach, had been coping fairly well until his dad moved his new girlfriend onto the family ranch a few weeks ago and told Liz that he didn't think that Zach should work for him as planned that spring.

"Now I wish I hadn't encouraged him to graduate early so that he could work for his dad...and now I know why Derek kept putting off having Zach move to the ranch."

It was not a good situation and there wasn't one thing Allie, the problem solver, could do about it, except listen.

"At least I have the day to cool off before I deal with him." Liz looked up at the ceiling briefly as if blinking back tears.

"I'm so sorry," Allie said. "If I can do anything to help...let me know." Although she couldn't think of anything she could do, except to listen, and she was happy to do that.

"Will do." Liz got to her feet and headed for the lower elementary science section while Allie booted up her computer. A few minutes later, her friend left the library with the butterfly books and Allie let out a sigh before focusing back on her keyboard.

She knew how rough it was to get divorced, but she could only imagine what it felt like to have a failed marriage affect your child.

* * *

BY THE TIME Allie returned from work, Jason was feeling more in control—almost to the point of being ready to go home and take a few hits. Kate had texted him earlier to say that she was leaving Max in Uncle Jimmy's capable hands and all Jason could think was that it served Jimmy right for being in cahoots with his father. Let him get a taste of the wrath of Max.

Allie went straight into the house after parking, but he figured she'd be out to inspect soon. It took her longer than he'd expected, but eventually she came out of the house dressed in jeans and a V-neck T-shirt that looked pretty damned good on her. Her long blond hair was caught in a messy knot that gave her a disheveled, just-tumbled-out-of-bed look that could spark a fantasy or two if he allowed himself. And then she spoke.

"This is taking longer than I thought it would."

"It'd go faster if I didn't take those naps in the afternoon."

Her head snapped around and then color rose from the neckline of her shirt as she realized he was playing her.

"If you mess with the boss, she'll dock your pay," she said. She propped a hand on her hip, looking him up and down. "But you're here more for the workout than the paycheck, right?"

"Allie?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you being so snarky toward me?"

She frowned as her lips parted. But she didn't say anything. He held her gaze, refusing to let her off the hook. She moistened her lips. "I, uh, am perhaps taking my day out on you?"

A question. As in "Would you accept this as an explanation?" No, he would not.

"I know you explained it all in detail in Culver Ranch and Feed, but I admit, I still don't get where all the animosity is coming from. Do you hate all football players?"

"I..."

"Or all people with money?"

"Just those that try to buy my ranch when it isn't for sale." She'd gotten an unexpected toehold.

"I don't want your ranch anymore. So maybe you can quit sniping at me."

Another pause, then she said slowly, "All right," sounding as if she hadn't been aware she had been sniping at him. Or maybe that was how she treated the men in her life. Maybe that was why she was divorced...but he didn't think so.

This had something to do with him personally and he wanted to know what and why, but now was not the time. "Thanks," he said easily.

"No problem," she replied stiffly.

Yeah, he decided as he loaded his tools a few minutes later, patience was a good thing and he was going to be patient with Ms. Allie Brody. Because as odd as it seemed, this job was one of the few bright spots in his life right now.

* * *

ALLIE STRODE OFF to the house after Jason started loading his man toys in the truck. Once inside, she pulled out the band that had held the knot in her hair and shook her head. Better.

Why was she being so snarky toward him?

Easy answer. Because he put her on edge. He'd been tall, good-looking and well-muscled in high school, but ten years later he'd acquired an aura of casual sensuality that was flat-out doing things to her every time they came into contract. Things she didn't want done to her. What choice did she have but to defend herself with snark?

She could keep her distance. Check his work after he left.

Yeah. That would be the safest way to handle things. Just stay away. Then she wouldn't be catching herself ogling him when she should be discussing the job.

She turned on her computer and checked to see if Dani had sent any new photos of her little niece, Clarice. Nothing. Damn. She could have used a good niece fix. She fired off touch-base emails to her mother and all three of her sisters, then shut down her computer and sat listening to the silence.

This was not what life after Kyle was supposed to be like. Living in the house where she'd been so unhappy, distracted by a man whom she had nothing in common with. A pro football player? Really?

Former pro.

All the same. When she'd finally hit her breaking point five years after being wed—four of which had been spent with her eyes wide shut as she supported her husband in endeavor after endeavor while the ranch fell down around them—her life was supposed to move forward. Yet here she was living in a house from her past, employing a man from her past. Working at the job she'd trained for, yet coming home feeling empty and unsatisfied.

She needed to give her life strategy some serious thought. And in the meantime, she was going to check for new calves. She'd just headed out the door when a car pulled into the driveway and once again she became aware of just how alone she was on the Lightning Creek. If trouble came, what means did she have available to deal with it?

And as the car pulled to a stop she realized that trouble had indeed just showed up in the form of her former father-in-law, Ray Largent.

She was definitely getting a dog. A big one. With lots of big teeth.

"Hi, honey," Ray said as he got out of his car.

Honey, her ass. Ray had been the one pushing Kyle to get a part of the Lightning Creek in the divorce settlement. And when he didn't get the real estate, he settled for everything he could get on

the place, even going so far as to haul off an antique tractor that had belonged to her grandfather. The tractor was back and Kyle was gone, working in another part of the state.

But Ray was here.

Allie didn't say hello. She wasn't one for playing games. She and Ray knew where they stood with one another and he could waste energy playing nice, if he wanted, but she wasn't going to.

"The ranch isn't for sale, Ray."

"Kyle's been hurt. Earlier today."

Allie felt the blood drain out of her face. "How?"

"Car accident while he was coming home from a job interview." Kyle had been a deputy sheriff while they'd been married, but he'd quit over a year ago to seek out the big bucks in the oil boom on the other side of the state. Rumor had it he'd recently been fired, and now Ray had all but confirmed it.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"He wanted me to tell you in person."

"How bad...?" From Ray's tone she was starting to fear permanent injury.

"Neck damage. Broken ribs and some sprains. He's in a lot of pain."

"But he'll recover?" Allie asked, needing to hear that he would. She had issues with Kyle, but she didn't want anything to happen to him. Once upon a time she'd thought she loved him.

"With time."

Allie swallowed and raised her chin. "Thank you for coming by, Ray. I appreciate not hearing this secondhand."

"He'd, uh, like it if you stopped by to see him. The boy has had a lot of time to think."

Allie felt as if she were a split second away from hyperventilation. She was sorry Kyle was hurt, but they were done. How could it possibly help him if she visited?

"I know he's been wrong in the past, but it would make him feel better."

"I'll think about it," Allie finally said.

"Thank you." Ray spoke so sincerely that Allie felt like a jerk for not instantly saying she'd see him. But she needed to think. "He's at Our Lady of the Mountains Hospital. He'll be there for some time."

Allie pressed her lips together and nodded. "Our Lady of the Mountains. Thank you."

Ray got into his car and with a lift of his hand, drove away, leaving Allie standing in her driveway, feeling like hell.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAX HAD LOST a little of his fight after his day with Jimmy. Jason didn't know whether to be suspicious or relieved. He decided to go with relieved, although he couldn't come up with any good reason for his father's change of attitude. Maybe Jimmy had explained reality to him...

Naw.

Jimmy was more likely to come up with a new scheme. Whatever the cause, Jason enjoyed his evening, which he spent watching a Giants game with the old man.

"How's your job?" Max asked during the seventh inning.

"Slow, but it'll get done."

"Don't know why you don't bring in the equipment."

"She can't afford it."

"Yet she can afford to pay you an hourly wage."

Minimum wage, but he wasn't going to tell his dad that. Max already thought his job was beyond stupid. "When she runs out of money, I'm done until she gets more."

Max stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Do you have the hots for her or something? Because there's easier ways to get women."

Jason debated. "She's attractive...but she's not real fond of professional athletes." And she had a chip on her shoulder the size of Kansas. He'd love to know why.

Max shook his head and focused on the game. Nothing more was said about Allie Brody or the barn. Jason sent Pat another text while watching the game, but again received no response. Finally he called and was put straight through to voice mail. He was contemplating his next move when the text came in.

I'm fine.

Good to know.

Jason's mouth tightened as he set down the phone, wishing he had his old friend back. This new Pat, he wasn't sure what to do with him, but the one thing he wouldn't do was abandon him. Too bad Pat made it so difficult to stick with him.

* * *

JASON DIDN'T KNOW if Allie expected him to show up on Saturday, but he much preferred pulling nails and sorting boards to hanging around the house, so he headed off to work at the usual time. When he got to the ranch, he parked near the rubble pile and pulled the bucket of tools out of the back.

"Jason?"

Allie appeared from around the corner of the canvas building. She looked both out of breath and relieved to see him. "I need help." She looked as if she half expected him to turn her down.

"With what?"

"A calf."

"Sure." He could chase a calf or hold a calf or whatever she needed doing. She gestured for him to follow her to the pasture where the cattle grazed, stopping at the gate to pick up a bucket she'd left there. She opened the gate and held it while he passed through, a quizzical frown on his face. The stuff in the bucket looked medical—medieval medical, because there were chains in there.

"I appreciate you doing this. This way I won't have to get the jack."

He didn't have to pretend to understand what she was talking about because she was already on her way across the field to where a cow lay on her side. As they got closer, he could see that she was straining, in the process of giving birth.

Allie set the bucket near the business end of the cow and pulled on a pair of surgical gloves. She didn't hand him a pair, so he figured he was good. He was also a touch apprehensive about his role. He'd seen puppies born once and that movie in sex ed, but birthing wasn't a common occurrence in his world. Judging from the cool way in which Allie was pouring disinfectant over the rear end of the cow and what he could only think of as the feet, it was a common occurrence in hers. She looked up at him, her blond ponytail sliding over her shoulder.

"Hand me the chains, okay?"

Jason reached in the bucket and pulled out what looked like a long choke chain for a dog.

"Have you done this before?" she asked, taking the chains from him.

He shook his head, but she wasn't looking at him as she expertly looped the ends around one small ankle, so he said, "Uh, no."

"It's easy. I just hope we're in time. This is one big baby and I don't know how long she's been down. She was pretty exhausted when I found her this morning."

"I see."

She attached the chain to the other ankle, having to reach inside the cow a little to get the job done. Jason realized that he was grimacing as he watched and forced his face to relax. No worse than a compound fracture and he'd seen a couple of those.

"Now you take hold of the middle, right here—" she handed him the chain "—and when I say to pull, you apply a steady pressure. We are not jerking the calf out of the cow, we're just helping her along. Understand?"

"Yeah." A wave of sweat broke over his forehead.

"When I say release, just keep the baby from sliding back in."

Allie started massaging the area where the feet were sticking out, then she said, “Pull. Gently.”

Jason pulled and a bit more leg showed, and then a nose, maybe.

“Let up.”

He let up, but kept enough pressure to keep the baby where it was. It truly did want to slide back inside.

“Pull,” Allie said, reaching in the cow a little to put her hand over the calf’s head. “Let up.” She tore open the slimy bag that covered the calf’s nose and a long bluish tongue lolled out. Jason was grimacing again and he didn’t try to stop. “Pull.”

Jason pulled. Once the head had emerged, the rest of the body slipped out in a rush of fluid and flopped onto the grass.

Allie’s shoulders sank in relief. “It’s alive.” She unhooked the chains, then stood up as the mom looked over her shoulder at her new baby.

“Best stand back.” Allie shot a look at him and then the corners of her mouth twitched. “First birth?” she asked dryly.

Jason shrugged, feeling distinctly out of his element. “I saw puppies born once. I was six.”

She laughed as she dropped the chains in the bucket. It wasn’t a full-on share-the-mirth laugh, but it was a start.

“Were all of these—” he gestured at the two older calves lying side by side in the grass near their grazing mothers “—born like this?”

“No. They came out the usual way. This mom’s a heifer—first birth. They have trouble sometimes.”

Well, the cow seemed to be getting into motherhood now, licking her calf all over as the little guy started squirming. “What would have happened if I wasn’t here?” he asked.

“I would have gotten the jack.”

“I don’t want to know.”

She laughed again as she peeled off the gloves and dropped them into the bucket on top of the chains, but when she raised her gaze back up to his, her expression grew serious. “Thank you for the help.”

“Not a problem.”

“After our discussion yesterday, I kind of thought—”

“Let’s straighten a few things out, Allie.”

“What things?” She looked both wary and curious.

“I don’t hold grudges. It’s a waste of energy.” He held her gaze to make his point, noting that Allie’s lips were pressed together, as if she were afraid of something slipping out. “I’m not the enemy, Allie. Never have been. Never will be.”

“I never thought of you as an enemy.”

“Or treated me like a friend.”

She gave a slow nod, pressing her lips even more tightly together as she glanced down at the gravel between them. When she looked back up at him he was struck by the shift in her expression, as if she’d just made a momentous decision. She drew in a breath and said, “Would you like to come to the house for a cup of coffee?”

A half smile lifted one corner of his mouth. “Thank you, Allie. I’d like that.”

* * *

JASON FOLLOWED ALLIE into the house and sat down at the table after washing up. She poured him a cup of coffee from the stainless steel carafe she’d filled before going out to check on the cows that morning, her mind racing as she tried to get a handle on this situation. The one she’d taken pains not to think too much about, despite their previous conversation on the matter. As in how much her less-than-friendly attitude had to do with her preconceived notions about Jason, and how much it had to do with the fact that she found him ridiculously attractive.

Definitely a mash-up of the two, but she was still trying to put her life back on track and it wasn't fair that he should suddenly appear and introduce unwelcome thoughts and sensations.

It also wasn't fair for her to take her frustrations out on him...even if he did cause them.

Jason took the cup she handed him and then waited until she'd sat down before taking a slow sip. Allie did the same, acutely aware that she was horrible at making small talk because she had no patience for small talk. But something needed to be said. The elephant in the room was growing larger.

"Kind of reminds me of our chess matches," he finally said.

Allie choked a little and set her cup down. "You intimidated me."

"Right back at you."

"Bull."

He shrugged his big shoulders and settled back in his chair. "I'm not going to lie to you, Allie. Birthing that calf was gross."

"Birth is not gross." And wasn't she thankful for the sudden shift in topic?

"Did you somehow miss that blue tongue? Or all the gunk that came out?" He spoke seriously, frowning a little for emphasis, but warmth lit his eyes and Allie found herself wanting to smile.

Do not be charmed. Stop now. "All I saw was an addition to my herd instead of a loss."

"Do you have many losses?"

"We used to have more until we started calving later in the season."

"It seems to me that you'd want to have them later. When it's warm."

Allie smiled a little. "Not if you're selling them. You want them to have as much growing time as possible before they go to market, which is why most ranchers calve in February. March at the latest. We're missing out in some ways by calving in April and May, but making up for it in others."

Jason frowned at her. "It's got to be nerve-racking, going to work and wondering if your cows might need a midwife."

"That's just how it is for a part-time rancher."

"Do you think you'll ever become a full-time rancher?"

"No. As soon as one of my sisters comes home, I'll move elsewhere."

"Out of the Eagle Valley?"

"Maybe. But definitely off the ranch."

"You don't like it here?"

"I didn't say that."

"No," he agreed. "You didn't."

But her tone and her body language had. After reminding herself that she didn't need to protect herself from Jason, that he wasn't the enemy, she said, "The ranch and I... We have our differences."

Jason took another slow sip of coffee and when Allie didn't expand on her answer, he said, "My dad and I have our differences. I guess it happens to everyone."

Allie smiled in acknowledgment, glad for the shift of subject. She was the only Brody sister who had issues with the ranch, but she was also the only sister to suffer tragedy there twice. One quick and devastating and the other slow and torturous.

"That's life. So...how has the Eagle Valley changed since you left?"

"I have been back a time or two." He smiled ruefully. "But not that many. Mostly I was training or playing." He stopped, as if analyzing his past, then his clear aqua gaze met hers. "A lot has changed. For one thing I miss the old movie theater. That new thing at the edge of town is ugly."

"Yes. I guess it was going to take too much money to bring the old theater up to code, so they shut it down." Allie had also loved the historic brick theater with the balcony and classic early-twentieth-century woodwork. "You're right. The new one isn't the same."

They finished their coffee while discussing the safe topic of local changes, and Allie told herself more than once that since she wasn't all that fascinated by hands, she could stop studying Jason's—

but it was better than looking at his face as they spoke and finding herself thinking that he was simply too damned good-looking for words.

Finally Allie pushed back her chair and started tidying up the table, carrying the coffee cups to the counter. “I need to get going,” she said on an apologetic note. “I have to visit someone in the hospital.”

“And I need to get to work.” He started for the door, then stopped. “Do you have many more pregnant cows?”

“Fourteen.”

“You know that you can call me anytime you need help.”

“Thank you.” She smiled politely at him. What else could she do?

After Jason had gone, Allie finished wiping the table, then rinsed the cups. She did everything she could to keep from slowing down long enough to acknowledge that being around him shook her. She wasn’t supposed to be thinking about guys. She was recovering from a guy. She needed to be thinking about making a future and not letting the ranch disintegrate while she was in command, as it tended to do.

After the kitchen was back in order, she grabbed her purse and went out to her car. She was going to see Kyle—and not because she felt guilty not doing it.

As she drove to the hospital, she told herself that this was a good thing to do. A way to prove to herself that she was done with that chapter of her life. Because she really had to move on past this bitterness. It was going on two years and she still felt anger toward the man—both for the promises he hadn’t kept and for the crappy things he’d done after the divorce.

Kyle, as it turned out, looked terrible. Two black eyes, a swollen lip, but no stitches that she could see. His other injuries, whatever they might be—bruised and broken ribs and sprains, according to Ray—were hidden by the sheet covering him.

Allie took a few steps into the room, hating the smell, hating the circumstances that had her there. Hating that she’d come. And what did she say now that he’d focused on her? “How’re you feeling?” wasn’t appropriate.

“I’m glad you’re okay. I mean, other than...” She gestured weakly.

“Yeah.” He spoke softly, his words slightly slurred.

Allie moved forward, but still kept her distance from the bed. She wished him no harm, but he had been so adversarial toward her and her sisters after he’d failed to get part of the Lightning Creek, that she was also having a hard time feeling anything other than regret that he’d been hurt. Seeing him like this did not stir any feelings of warmth or desire for a reunion. Was that why he’d wanted to see her? To rekindle something?

If so, injured or not, he was in for a rude awakening. Allie wasn’t about to complicate her life now that she was on the road to straightening it out.

“I just wanted to stop by, let you know I was thinking about you.”

“Appreciate that.”

And then there wasn’t a whole lot to say. “Well, I don’t want to wear you out. I wish you a speedy recovery.”

“Allie?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to have trouble covering my part of the medical bills because I’m between jobs.”

Allie’s heart dropped. He’d wanted to see her to shake her down?

“I’m sorry to hear that, Kyle.” She made a backward step toward the door. “I’m sure you know that I don’t have any money with all of my student loans. Maybe your dad could help you out.”

“Yeah. Uh, he’s not in a position to do that.”

And she was? Honest to Pete.

“Sorry. I’m sure the hospital will take payments.”

"I'll need therapy afterward."

Allie's patience was about to snap. "What do you want, Kyle?"

"It's what I don't want. I don't want to file medical bankruptcy." His gaze held hers and she searched, trying to find a hint of the guy she'd fallen in love with. Had time changed him so much? Or had she fallen in love with an illusion?

"And..."

"Would you co-sign a loan for me?"

"I'm up to my neck in student loans!"

"If you used that eighty-acre parcel on the far side of the creek as collateral... Not that you'd need collateral. I have some savings to use to make payments until I land a job."

"Oooh, no..." Allie shook her head. "Uh-uh. I'm not attaching the ranch to a loan." She'd taken great pains not to do that while funding her education.

"Only part of—"

"No." At any minute she expected Kyle's heart-rate monitor to top out. If she'd been attached to a monitor, it would already be there. "I'm sorry about your predicament." But it was not her predicament, no matter how guilty she felt saying no. "The ranch belongs to all of us. I couldn't make a decision like that alone if I wanted to."

"Will you talk to your sisters?"

"I have to go, Kyle."

Allie turned and left the room, walking to her car in a haze of anger. She hated not helping people, but Kyle was asking too much.

Yet, she still felt jabbing guilt beneath her anger. Why? What was wrong with her? She'd spent five years of her life supporting this guy, believing in him, and she'd been let down every single time. Wasn't that enough?

* * *

AFTER ALLIE HAD driven away, Jason finished dismantling the roof and then took a break before starting on the main structure, which was going to take some time. A couple weeks, maybe, working by hand. He was glad. As Max got healthier, he got more cantankerous and controlling, reminding Jason of a little kid pushing boundaries.

He sat on the tailgate of his truck, drinking from his water bottle and studying the barn wreckage, debating where to start. He honestly did need a hard hat for this part of the job. Part of the structure was still intact and several beams were attached to the top of a standing wall, although their opposite ends rested on the ground. Potential for trouble there. He had no idea how well the upper ends of the beams were attached, or what it would take to bring the standing wall down. He'd find out soon enough.

After stowing his water bottle back in the cooler, he approached his project. In the rubble, he could see old hand tools and gardening implements that had been stored in the building. A beat-up saddle lay in the jumble between two wooden barrels, one of which was now smashed. Dismantling this part of the building was going to feel like a treasure hunt. He wondered how much of the stuff was useful and how much had been stored instead of being thrown away. That was how a lot of valuable antiques had survived until present day, but none of the stuff he could see looked particularly valuable...except for the old bit-and-brace drill sitting just under a fallen beam. He loved bit-and-brace drills—had spent a lot of time as a kid drilling holes in boards his grandfather had given him to keep him busy. Rather than wait the day or two until he'd got to that area by knocking things down, he carefully started picking his way across fallen boards.

Oh, yeah. He bent and picked up the drill. He'd never worked in the construction trade, but his dad collected old tools and he knew a good one when he saw it. The knob at the top was black walnut if he wasn't mistaken. He started back toward safety, the drill in one hand. He'd ask Allie if she wanted to sell it and he'd also let her know that it was worth something before she made the decision.

He was just about to step off the two-by-six he'd been using as a balance beam onto a sturdier-looking fallen beam when he heard an ominous crack. Before he could save himself, the board snapped and his leg plunged down into the jumble of debris, shoving up his pant leg as his shin skidded down the rough surface of a broken board. Shit.

He grimaced as he pulled his leg out of the hole. It stung. Gingerly he made his way to his truck, trying to remember the last time he'd skinned himself up good. When he was a kid on his bike maybe?

Blood had seeped through his jeans by the time he got there. He'd had a lot of injuries over the years, but few of them bled much, if you didn't count getting cleated, or that one time his nose had gotten broken. He was just working his pant leg up over the scrape when he heard the car coming down the road.

Allie. He pushed the pant leg back into place and stood next to his truck, hoping she'd keep going past him. No such luck. She pulled up beside him and rolled down her window.

"Done with the roof I see."

"Just finished." He picked up the drill, noticed the blood on his fingers and hoped she didn't. "I found this in the main part of the building."

"How?"

"Wasn't easy." Not only that, it'd hurt. He nodded at the tool. "It's got some value to it and I was wondering, if you don't have a sentimental attachment because it was your dad's or something, if I could buy it for my old man."

"I don't see why not."

He started to smile, but it stalled out as her gaze dropped and then fixed on his lower leg, where the blood was gluing his pants to his skin. When she brought her gaze back up to his, there was a question in it, and he could see that she didn't expect to have to ask that question out loud.

"I had a mishap while getting the drill."

"You're the second beat-up guy I've dealt with today."

"Who was the other?" And were you responsible?

"My ex. He got into a car wreck."

"Nothing too serious, I hope."

"Broken ribs, black eyes. He's hurting, but nothing life-threatening. He was lucky." She said the words in a way that did not invite further comment. "Do you want to go to the house and clean up your leg, or what?"

Well, yeah, he did. "I don't want to bleed all over your place."

"Won't be the first time," she said. She jerked her head toward the passenger side of her car, but he shook his head.

"I can walk a hundred yards."

"Suit yourself."

"Walking is easier than getting into your car."

"Oh." Her eyebrows lifted as she considered his size compared to the space available in her tiny passenger seat. "I guess so. And here I thought that you were going all macho on me."

"I know," he said with a half smile. She did tend to think the worst of him and he might have to do something about that.

She waited for him at the gate and then he followed her into the house. She gestured for him to wait in the living room and then walked through the kitchen into the adjoining mudroom. She came back with a plastic bucket of neatly folded terry-cloth towels with gauze pads and athletic tape resting on top. She held out the pail with a small shrug. "Vet bucket. All the towels are clean and bleached. You can get them as bloody as you want."

"Thanks."

"I hope you don't mind using the same towels used for animal emergencies, but like I said, they're clean."

He raised his hand. “No. Honest. I’m good with it. Glad I don’t have to make do with wet paper towels.”

‘That was kind of what I was thinking. I usually use duct tape with the animals, but I thought you might be more comfortable with athletic tape.”

A joke. Cool.

She pointed the way to the bathroom and Jason headed down the hall, bucket in hand. He casually glanced back before he opened the door. Allie hadn’t moved, but her chin jerked up as he met her gaze. He lifted an eyebrow and then walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Allie Brody had been staring at his ass.

CHAPTER SIX

WELL, THAT WAS the very first time ever she’d been caught ogling a guy’s ass and it had happened in her living room.

Allie scrubbed her hands over her cheeks. That’s what she got for giving in to temptation. What was it with this guy? Why was he her Kryptonite?

Okay. No big deal. Surely she wasn’t the only woman he’d ever caught staring at him, but...this was different. She was his employer. He was her employee. Temporarily, but all the same.

But what it really came down to was that it was Jason Hudson, whom she’d thought of as an arrogant jock and who was turning out to be much more together and pleasant than she’d ever expected.

And attractive. Don’t forget attractive.

How could she? He was right there. Being attractive.

She wasn’t comfortable being attracted to him because that wasn’t part of her go-it-alone-and-be-secure plan. She’d had enough heartache over the past several years. Being alone equaled no more heartache.

Being attracted meant being tempted to not be alone, which in turn tempted heartache.

Allie lifted her chin and headed off for the kitchen, where she went to the sink and poured herself a glass of water. Maybe if she hydrated, she could gain control of her hormones. She took a long drink.

Yes. Better.

Or maybe it was the fact that there were now a couple of walls and a healthy distance between herself and the guy with the great ass.

Allie emptied the glass, then opened the dishwasher and started putting the dishes into the cupboard, resolutely pulling her thoughts away from Jason until she heard the bathroom door open and her nerves jumped. Jason’s tread was heavy on her old wood floors and each step made her heart rate speed up just a tiny bit more.

Then the steps stopped.

Allie froze, wondering what he was doing, until he started moving again and she busied herself arranging glasses in the cupboard. Unaware. Unaffected. Yes. That was her.

“I didn’t know you painted,” Jason said as he came into the kitchen, carrying the bucket in one hand and the soiled towels in the other. His pant leg was soaked from the knee down, where he’d washed the blood out of it. Just looking at it made Allie feel a little clammy. Wet jeans were never comfortable.

Nor was facing the guy who’d caught her checking him out.

“I don’t paint,” she said matter-of-factly. “Not anymore. It was just a...phase.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her in an expression that said he’d like to know more, but wasn’t going to ask—probably because of her forbidding expression. “I only used one towel, but I did a number on it. Where should I put it?”

She gestured toward the mudroom and he followed her to the washing machine. She lifted the lid and he dropped the wet, bloody towel inside.

"I'm sure there'll be more to follow," she said as she closed the lid again.

"Do you have a lot of injuries here?"

"No, but when you have this many animals, stuff happens. If not blood, then mud. Trust me —that washer will have a load in no time."

"Huh." He flexed his knee as if testing whether or not his administrations would hold. "Well. I'm good as I'll be. I guess I'll head on back and try not to get hurt." He pointed to the back door. "Can I go out this way?"

"Of course."

He paused, his hand on the door handle. "Are you going to dock my pay for this?"

"Not if you don't sue me for having an attractive nuisance on my property."

"I recall signing a paper releasing you from indemnity if I got hurt."

"Good call on my part."

"Looks like it." He held her gaze and when she didn't say anything more, he turned and headed out the door. After he was safely out of the house, Allie moved to the window to watch him walk to his truck, free to watch his ass all she'd like. She let out a breath as she let the curtain drop.

The house felt empty and as she started toward the kitchen, it seemed to echo alone, alone, alone in time with her footsteps.

Alone had been her natural state for the past year, but not one that she particularly welcomed, even though she wasn't certain how to change that without jeopardizing the fragile sense of control she had over her life right now. It was crazy, but even when she was with people she felt alone—probably a holdover from all those years that she pretended everything was okay with her and Kyle when they were not. She'd been the great pretender, with her sisters and her mother. With herself. She'd protected her deep secret, the fact that she was barely holding herself together in the face of the disintegration of both her marriage and the ranch, by erecting barriers. Not letting conversations get too deep, or herself get too close to others. Her sisters had been off in distant places, living their own lives. And she'd been here on the ranch, lying about hers. Lying hadn't turned out well in any respect, so she was determined to be honest with herself this time around.

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