

Linda O. Johnston

COLTON 911: CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE



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Linda Johnston

Colton 911: Caught In The Crossfire

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Colton 911: Caught In The Crossfire / L. O. Johnston —
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Colton 911: Caught in the Crossfire He can handle killers, but one woman leaves him defenceless When ranch hand Melody Hayworth insists on working a case of cattle rustling with Deputy Sheriff Casey Colton, she disarms Casey-in more ways than one. As passion ignites on the range, Casey must resist letting down his guard-which could cost him more than he ever expected.

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From hunting cattle rustlers
To being hunted by a killer

Investigating cattle rustlers seems like a typical day on the job for Deputy Sheriff Casey Colton. But when ranch hand Melody Hayworth insists on working the case with him, he's reluctant to involve a civilian. Fighting their growing bond while tracking lawbreakers proves no easy task. And as Casey and Melody stumble across a corpse, they're caught in a criminal's crosshairs. The deputy's new mission? Protect Melody and find the killer before it's too late.

LINDA O. JOHNSTON loves to write. While honing her writing skills, she worked in advertising and public relations, then became a lawyer...and enjoyed writing contracts. Linda's first published fiction appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and won a Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery Short Story of the Year. Linda now spends most of her time creating memorable tales of paranormal romance, romantic suspense and mystery. Visit her on the web at www.lindaohnston.com

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To my wonderful husband, Fred. Of course.

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Chapter 1

Casey Colton dashed up the large stairway from the first floor of the sheriff's department building in Sur County, Arizona. As deputy sheriff, he was used to taking orders, but the curt phone call he'd just received from his boss, Jeremy Krester, was more of a command. Jeremy was usually fairly laid-back, so that worried Casey.

"Hi, Bob," he said as he entered Jeremy's outer office, not stopping behind the desk stacked with folders but swerving around toward the door behind it.

Apparently Bob Andrews, a fellow deputy, had been informed of his pending presence. "Go on in," said the young, wide-eyed guy, who was wearing a beige uniform that matched the one Casey wore. "Sheriff Krester's expecting you."

As Casey knew well.

He reached out, turned the doorknob and hurried inside. And stopped near the doorway. Sheriff Krester wasn't alone.

Of course, Casey had expected to see his tall, thin, gray-haired boss sitting at the desk facing the door of the sizable office. He wore a similar uniform to Casey's, too, but with a lot more decorations than the normal colorful shoulder patches of the Sur County Sheriff's Department. And his badge was even more prominently displayed on his chest.

But the other guy? That was a surprise.

So was the fact that he paced the wood floor and only stopped for an instant as Casey entered, barely maneuvering around him before continuing.

It was Clarence Edison, the town selectman of Cactus Creek. He was dressed in a suit, as he usually was, and was all business.

In his late sixties, Clarence hadn't gone completely gray but still had more darkness in his hair than Jeremy. He'd been a selectman for many years, but he was known just as much—maybe even more—for owning the successful OverHerd Ranch, outside of town, where he raised Angus cattle. Casey had only seen the large ranch when driving by it.

And, yes, its name—OverHerd—was intended to be a pun, he'd been informed. Not that he was surprised. The selectman was a kidder, someone who liked keeping things light. Casey had noted some of that, too, when he'd attended city meetings, where Clarence got people laughing at times—possibly to make other government officials or even local citizens lighten up. And, therefore, do things his way.

Casey had met Clarence now and then at various town events when the sheriff's department helped to keep things civil and in order. He seemed like a nice guy. He was smart and enjoyed being in charge and talking to large groups, even having fun with them.

But what was he doing here now? And why was he pacing that way?

"Sit down," Jeremy ordered Casey as he waved at one of the three chairs facing his cluttered desk. Jeremy also glanced at Clarence, but his expression toward the selectman appeared to be more of a suggestion than a command.

Casey obeyed as he eyed his boss without looking at the town elder. His curiosity increased even more but he couldn't push things. Not with these two men, who were both used to being in charge.

But it didn't take long for Clarence to start talking even as he did deign to take a seat, and then turned his chair to face Casey.

"Need your help, Deputy," Clarence growled in a low voice Casey hadn't heard before, his blue eyes intense. "I understand you helped catch a cattle rustler a couple months ago."

Was that what this was about? But what had Jeremy told him? "That's right, although it wasn't a big deal. There were only a few cattle involved—one bull and two cows. And it turned out it was a family-feud kind of situation."

Noting some movement from the corner of his eye, Casey turned and saw Jeremy making a slight throat-cutting gesture—in other words, he was telling Casey to shut up about that event.

“Ahh,” Jeremy said with a clearly forced smile on his narrow face. “Our deputy there is being a bit modest. Yes, it did turn out to be a family problem, but the members whose cattle disappeared didn’t know that at first, and neither did we. Casey figured it out—and found the missing cattle. There were some charges brought against the thieving relatives but they talked it through and paid for some of our time and...well, it’s all resolved now, and they’re back to being okay.”

“Okay,” Clarence repeated. He, too, had turned to face the sheriff. “You won’t find anything similar in my situation, though.”

“No,” Jeremy said. “There’s a lot more involved. Why don’t you tell Deputy Colton about it?” He nodded to the selectman, then looked back at Casey.

He was right, Casey thought as Clarence filled him in. This situation didn’t sound nearly as simple as the one Casey had helped with before. For one thing, it involved the disappearance of a dozen cows, not just three. And they were Angus cows being used to procreate, to increase the number of cattle at the ranch and for sale to other ranches.

Very valuable Angus cows. Each was worth thousands of dollars.

No wonder Clarence was upset.

“I want you to act quickly,” he continued. “One good thing is that I’ve had all the cattle tagged with GPS, but the terrain doesn’t work for cars, and helicopters or planes couldn’t land there. Seeing anything like that could cause the rustlers to kill the cattle and run, anyway. Even drones could scare them into doing something bad. They seem to be on the move so we can’t pinpoint where they are for you to send a whole team in to get them. Not yet, at least. And—”

Casey heard a buzzing sound. Clarence pulled a phone out of his pocket and looked at it, then listened.

After a minute he said, “Damn. I need to head back to my office right now for an important meeting. I want someone from here who knows what he’s doing to get to my ranch right away. A couple of ranch hands are there and can show you around and explain what happened and when.” He stood and began pacing between Casey and his superior’s desk again. He looked at Casey. “Since you’ve solved one rustling case lately, even though it’s not quite the same thing, I agree with Sheriff Krester that it makes sense for you to go and scope things out. Maybe even solve it on the spot.” His grin toward Casey was wide, though his eyes narrowed and remained skeptical.

Casey asked, “Any people you think might be the rustlers—family members or not?”

“Not,” Clarence said strongly. “I trust my family—but that didn’t stop me from notifying the local members by phone and listening to their shock and sympathy. And analyzing it. I’ve no reason to suspect any of them. Besides...”

He paused, looked from Casey toward the sheriff, then back again.

“Besides what?” Jeremy prompted, as Casey believed was appropriate, considering the way Clarence had spoken and looked at him.

“Besides, the dozen cattle of mine that were stolen were all very valuable females. Cows.” He paused. “So that tells me that whoever did it was one hell of a *coward*.” All three of them laughed at the emphasis he placed on the first syllable—briefly and not particularly hilariously.

“Well, let me at him. Or her.” Casey stood directly in front of the selectman. “I won’t allow whoever it is to cow me. I’ll do my damndest to figure this out soon and get your cattle back.”



Melody Hayworth pulled open the front door of the main house of OverHerd Ranch before the doorbell finished chiming.

She’d been waiting inside uncomfortably, along with Pierce Tostig, one of the other ranch hands, since their boss had called half an hour ago.

It was midafternoon. Earlier, a couple of the other hands had headed out toward the pasture where one of the herds of special, valuable Angus cattle had supposedly spent the night and morning, as usual...but they hadn't found them there. Using the GPS apps on their phones, they'd confirmed that the geotagged cows were now far away, somewhere still on the ranch, but heading toward its outer edges. It appeared that the fence had been partly destroyed, apparently by rustlers, and the cows had gotten out. Those hands had called Clarence, who'd expressed concern not only about the missing stock, but also about those that remained. He'd insisted that all of the ranch hands—or at least most of them—find and protect the rest.

He'd also said he'd get the authorities involved, and then ordered that a couple of employees—Pierce Tostig and Melody—should stick around to help and advise the sheriff's department when someone from there arrived at the ranch, then stay involved in finding those missing cattle.

Now, Melody said "Please come in" to the man in uniform who stood there—a deputy sheriff, according to the patch on his upper left sleeve.

"Thanks." He immediately held out his hand for a shake after she shut the door. "I'm Deputy Casey Colton," he said. "I was sent here by Selectman Clarence Edison because—"

"Because some of our—*his*—cattle have been rustled," Melody interrupted. She had no need to wait for any further introductions, but she noticed that his grip was strong and somehow sexy, which was irrelevant. Her boss had made it clear in his phone call that she and the others were to give the deputy who showed up all the information they had about the rustling situation. And to show him where the cattle had been located, and how they'd apparently gotten out...with help.

"Let's go in here first," she said to Deputy Colton, gesturing for him to follow her through the attractively decorated wooden entryway into the adjoining living room. Melody considered the decor a bit overdone, but it worked well for a ranch house owned by someone as revered—and rich—as her boss.

She watched the deputy's face as he looked around. The guy was good-looking, and not just because he wore that uniform. His hair was brown and cut relatively short. His matching eyebrows over dazzling blue eyes were nicely arched and his chin was slightly prominent. He had some light facial hair, maybe surprising because of his job. But it looked good on him.

In fact, every part of his appearance was eye-catching—and Melody could have kicked herself for even noticing.

The only thing important about this guy was whether he could find the missing cattle.

For now, his boots rapped on the portion of the wooden floor not covered by an antique gold-and-brown area rug. The deputy approached Pierce, who stood near one of the windows at the far side of the room beside the stone fireplace.

Heading toward them, Pierce was dressed even more casually than Melody's typical blue denim work shirt, jeans and black boots with tight laces. He wore an oversize, short-sleeved white T-shirt and overly faded jeans—fashionable, perhaps, but it seemed as if there were more holes than denim.

"Hi," the deputy said, stopping near the side of the ornate brown leather sofa set that dominated the room's seating arrangement. He introduced himself to Pierce, as he'd done with Melody, and was clearly taking charge of this meeting. "Can we sit down? I want to hear everything about the missing cattle—where they were, who discovered they were gone. Everything."

"Yeah, I figured." Pierce plopped down on one of the two-seater portions of the sofa set. Ears protruded from wavy hair clipped close on the sides of his head. He was around forty, like Melody, and was clean-shaven with blue eyes. Pierce was okay-looking and mostly genial, but perhaps not as hard a worker as he should be.

Melody took a seat on the similar sofa section, while the deputy sat on the larger one and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. He looked toward her as if encouraging her to begin the description.

But Pierce took over. Pointing toward the rear of the house, he described the five-hundred-acre ranch and about how many cattle there were—quite a few more than those that were stolen,

fortunately. “Our main range is out that way. It’s divided into sections because of the terrain. Dry sand in some areas, grass and higher growth in others, lots of hillsides, small mountains, all that kind of thing.”

“Interesting,” the deputy said. “I’ll want to see it soon, or as much of it as possible. Now, tell me more about who discovered the problem and how.”

Again he looked toward Melody. Pierce attempted to answer, never mind that Deputy Colton seemed to be addressing her. But as much as she liked Pierce and the way he mostly helped her learn about this ranch, Melody disliked being ignored. She spoke up, talking over Pierce.

“As it turns out, I probably should have been the one to discover the problem, but I wasn’t.” She described how she and some ranch hands, including Pierce, resided in apartments in the bunkhouse behind this house and slightly west of the stables. The fenced-in ranch land began behind them, and the several herds of cattle ranged in different fenced areas within it.

Last night, she hadn’t slept well, although she wasn’t sure why. “Now, though, I believe I might have heard something in the distance while asleep that disturbed me, though I didn’t fully awaken.”

“I’ll want to see the location of your residences, particularly yours,” the lawman said.

“Of course, Deputy Colton.” From what she’d learned, the name *Colton* was an important one in many areas. Whether or not he was a lawman, though, she didn’t particularly like his knowing where she lived.

“Just call me Casey,” the law-enforcement official said with a small grin on that good-looking face. As uncomfortable as she felt, she knew that getting along with him, including being on a first-name basis, was probably going to be helpful in the long run as they worked with him to find the missing cattle.

“Okay, Casey. And as you know, I’m Melody.”

“And I’m Pierce,” the other man said. “Are we all going to head to bed together now?”

Melody found herself laughing, even as the discomfort within her eased a bit. “Not I,” she said.

“Only if the missing cattle are there,” Casey retorted. “So, okay, tell me more about how you discovered that those cattle were missing.” He smiled at Pierce first, then her. “And we’ll keep our minds on the range, not in the bedroom.”

“Fine with me,” Melody said with a shake of her head. Although the idea of combining Casey and a bedroom... She forced the thought out of her head.

“Well, if that’s the case,” Pierce said, “I’m out of here. I’m supposed to be out in the east pasture with a couple of the other hands but thought I was needed here.” He stood, nodded toward Casey and said, “Hope you find those missing cows soon. Real soon.” And then he left.

So, no matter what Clarence said, apparently Pierce wasn’t staying involved.

“I second what he said,” Melody told Casey. “And though I can tell you a lot more about this place, I think it’ll be more productive if we go outside and I show you around.”

“Fine,” Casey said. “I’ll want to see everything you and the others have found so far before I really dig into the investigation.”

“Sure,” Melody said. “I’ve only worked here for about six months, but I’ve learned a lot about this great ranch. And although I haven’t gone chasing those missing cattle yet, we can go to the place they got past the OverHerd fencing and start our real investigation there.”

They both stood and she looked at Casey. He had an odd expression on his face. A scowl, she thought, and it seemed to mar his good looks.

What was he thinking? she wondered. Good thing he was scowling, though. He clearly wasn’t having the same kinds of thoughts about her as she had about him.

Although... Well, not going to happen.

It was better that way.

Chapter 2

Our real investigation? Casey didn't want to contradict Melody, not when he needed her to show him what she and the others had found so far, but she wasn't going to be part of *his* investigation.

He was the deputy assigned here. This was his job.

And besides...well, he was finding it a bit uncomfortable to be around Melody, especially now, when they were alone.

Problem was, she seemed much too beautiful to be a ranch hand. Her long, dark hair was secured behind her head in a ponytail, and she had a gorgeous face, with deep brown eyes above high cheekbones and below attractively curved, dark eyebrows. Those eyes showed what she appeared to be feeling—sometimes infuriated by the rustling that had gone on here, sometimes amused, or irritated, by what Pierce had said, sometimes pleading with Casey to fix the problem...and always winsome and appealing.

Too appealing. Never mind that she appeared to be a little older than him.

And since he'd been left at the altar four years ago, he hadn't been interested in another woman. Didn't want to be now.

But he needed information from her. So—

“Great,” he said. “Let's go.”

He glanced around again before beginning to follow her out the door. The sofa from which he'd risen, which matched the other seats, had been surprisingly comfortable considering how elaborate it was, with its leather seating punched evenly with deep matching buttons and back lined with attractive, carved wood. It looked expensive. Everything in this room—everything he'd seen at this ranch—looked expensive. But then, he didn't doubt that Clarence Edison could afford all that and more.

Though perhaps not as much if he didn't get back his valuable missing cattle.

Melody, hips swaying gently even as she hurried, led him in a different direction down the hallway they'd walked along before, and soon they passed through the large kitchen, which was also elaborately outfitted with expensive-looking equipment, though no one was working there now. Did Edison have a personal chef? He wouldn't be surprised.

Soon they were on the varnished wooden porch, having exited from the rear door. The yard beyond was mostly dirt decorated with desert plants, cacti and more. Straight ahead, past the elongated stables and an even larger barn with a peaked roof, a mountain range rose, not especially tall but broad. Another building, possibly a bunkhouse, was located near the back of the ranch house. Toward the south, beyond the substantial-looking fence, was land covered with grass, as far as he could see. He couldn't tell how large the vast rolling lawn was, but judging by what he understood of the ranch's success, it probably went on for many miles.

“I don't think you need to see the insides of the buildings, at least not now,” Melody said. “The stable houses our horses, of course. We ranch hands usually ride them when we're heading out into the pastures to observe and take care of the grazing herds. The cattle don't spend much time in the barn, although the cows sometimes do when they're calving, or if there's any indication of illness. For now, we could ride out to the pastures on horseback, but I think you'll get a better sense of the pasture if we just walk this time. Okay?”

“Fine,” Casey said. It would be a good idea for him to borrow a horse when he'd learned the basics and was ready to start his real investigation, but for now he would learn best if he took the time to walk around and look at everything he could from that perspective. As long as—“But you will take me to the fenced area where the cattle escaped, won't you?”

“Absolutely,” Melody said. “All the hands are aware of it, and have seen the damage to the fence there, too. The other herds are now within different fenced areas so they can't disappear that way, too.”

“Fine.”

“And in case our boss didn’t tell you, the cows are all branded with a logo that says ‘OHR’ for OverHerd Ranch. Even more important, they’re all equipped with GPS trackers. But the terrain out there isn’t appropriate for driving out to find them, so all we have so far is an accurate idea which way they went.”

“Yes, he mentioned that. Thanks.” Not surprising that the ranch hands were up-to-date—but it was a bit surprising that apparently no one had used the technology to go after the cattle yet.

Although it was a better thing that they hadn’t, if rustlers were involved. Law enforcement was his job, not theirs.

For now, he found himself smiling slightly in amusement as the slender and clearly physically fit Melody hurried off in front of him, as she undoubtedly wanted to reach the pasture that usually contained the cattle—when they weren’t missing. He hurried, too, to catch up with her and stay by her side. He began asking questions about the landscape, the types of plants and the topography, which was flat at first but he saw rolling ridges in the near background.

She climbed quickly over the portion of the long, substantial-looking fence that was chest-high to her, a bit less to him. The way she scaled it agilely made it appear as if she practiced daily. Maybe she did. And he told himself again to quit noticing such things.

His mind landed briefly on his ex-fiancée, Georgia. He and his fraternal twin brother, Everett, had known her from childhood. And Everett’s best friend had been Sean Dodd, Georgia’s brother, but she’d dumped Casey.

But enough of that. He had important things to think about now. As he had to do too often, even now, he eliminated Georgia from his thoughts.

The weather was typical for this time of year—November—in this part of Arizona. It was sometimes warm but far from scorching, though it often grew cooler, especially at night. A nearly perfectly blue sky, no humidity. Nearly perfect.

Past the fence, as they both strode over the uneven, grassy ground, he asked what Melody knew about the ranch and its origins, just to make conversation until she got them to where she could show him something significant.

As Melody glanced sideways toward him, her long black ponytail swayed. “I can tell you what I heard, but I’m a relative newcomer here. The other hands have been here longer.”

She wasn’t looking at him now, but somehow her expression had hardened.

Where had she lived before? Why had she decided to become a ranch hand, and why here?

Was she unhappy about being the least experienced of the ranch hands here? He was highly curious all of a sudden, especially considering that oddly defensive look on her face. He asked, “So where did you come from? Is this your first job as a ranch hand?”

She again looked at him. Her brow creased and her mouth tightened. He assumed she was going to tell him where to go, to stop asking questions.

Maybe she didn’t want to think of the past, either.

“Er... I’m sorry,” he began, wanting to back off. “I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

But she responded...kind of. “I came from Texas. And, no, this isn’t my first job as a ranch hand. I learned all about it there.” She turned her attention toward where she was walking, as she should on this uneven area. “And one of the things I know well is that this kind of grass, this terrain, supports cattle well.” She began a description of how she had studied different kinds of grasses and that these pastures seemed to incorporate several, although she wasn’t certain. “Whatever they are, the grasses here seem to feed some pretty healthy cattle.” She started talking about fescue and rye and stuff he really didn’t care about, but she made it sound noteworthy.

“Interesting” was all he said. And in a way it was—considering the source.

He was finding Melody much too interesting... Which had to stop.

He started examining the topography more closely. It was flat in some areas, then rose to low hills and was flat again.

“Hey.” Melody had suddenly stopped talking about grasses. “We’re finally approaching where they got out.”

She kept walking as she pointed out a spot in the distance...and then tripped. He instinctively reached out to grab her and hold her up, although he quickly realized she’d regained her balance on her own.

“Thanks,” she said, anyway, her voice hoarse as she pulled her arm from his hand quickly. She immediately looked away from him and began to walk fast again.

He had an urge to hold her hand—to help her keep her balance. But that would be a bad idea. A *very* bad idea.

He had a sense that if he tried it, he’d be the one to trip over his own feet and fall onto his knees. And he’d be the one to look bad.

She was the ranch hand, not him. She could most likely wrangle a steer with her eyes closed. Even tie knots a lot better than him.

Instead of holding on to her, he’d take a different kind of advantage of her company now, since he’d be on his own for the actual investigation, at least initially, and possibly until another deputy or two was assigned to work with him. And being in Melody’s presence...well, asking her questions related to what had happened here would be a whole lot easier for him than holding any other kind of conversation with her.

Like a flirtation? No way. There were no women in his life now. He didn’t want any, despite how attractive she was. And especially not until he’d learned enough to be sure she wasn’t involved in stealing the cattle.

So—who’d taken them, and why? They could certainly talk about that. It wasn’t something he had much of a notion about on his own yet, not without investigating first—though he did have one potential suspect in mind that wasn’t Melody.

According to local news, Edison’s wife, Hilda, had left him last year and was no longer in town—or so Casey believed, but that didn’t mean she was innocent. Hilda Edison was surely getting up in years, like her ex, so she probably couldn’t have done this herself. But had she arranged for the rustling for her own financial gain, or revenge...or both?

Melody started responding to what he’d asked before, relaying her knowledge about the origins of OverHerd Ranch, which she had already admitted was limited since she’d moved here fairly recently. She understood that Clarence, who had grown up in Phoenix with a wealthy family, had moved to Cactus Creek after college and started the ranch. Then he’d married and he and his wife had a couple of kids, who were grown now and living elsewhere. She didn’t know much about the ranch’s development, which was fine since it probably had nothing to do with the current situation, although it might have been interesting to hear.

Casey could ask Clarence about that, if necessary, or maybe even look it up online. But for now, he interrupted gently and asked instead who she and the other ranch hands suspected in this, and why.

Unsurprisingly, she mentioned Hilda first. The other hands were already gossiping that their boss’s ex might be involved. No one knew how much Hilda had gotten from the divorce, but if she didn’t consider it enough, that could be a motive for her to steal some cattle.

Their kids? From what she’d gathered, Clarence had remained fairly generous with them, so while they were possible suspects, they didn’t rank high on the others’ lists.

Who else? Again, there were rumors, sometimes about political opponents or other townsfolk who didn’t always agree with how Clarence ran things, but no one person stood out as having anything particularly against the man. No, the ranch hands seemed to think it was somewhat random.

“You might check in other areas around here to see if there’ve been other rustling situations lately, and if any of them seem at all similar,” Melody said. A good idea, one he’d already thought

of and would make sure Sheriff Krester had someone work on while Casey conducted his on-site investigation here.

“Will do” was all he said to Melody. And for the next few minutes both of them remained quiet. They were getting close to the clearly damaged fence, and Casey, at least, was studying the rolling hillside, mostly covered in grass and patches of other kinds of plant life, but with several other areas of bare soil. There were more pasture areas beyond the broken fence that seemed to stretch forever.

And no sign of cattle anywhere.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearing three o'clock. They'd been out for more than half an hour, and the walk back would also take that long. He wanted to spend some time at the broken-fence site first, too.

There would still be a few hours of daylight after their return, on this late fall day. Still, even if he found something around here, darkness might drop before he could deal with it. It would make more sense to return tomorrow. On horseback, maybe.

On his own, with whatever it took to track the cows' GPS signals.

Suddenly feeling the urge to stop wasting time and get to the fence already, Casey began sprinting forward. And he noticed that Melody was keeping up with him.

The fence consisted of oblong wooden stakes of moderate height, anchored into the ground, with three rows of straight metal piping connecting each pair of those stakes.

Here, though, four of the stakes had been knocked from their anchors and damaged, with gouges in the splintered wood indicating that some kind of tool had been used. The piping had been removed and stacked in rows off to the side. And the grassy ground beneath the opening was tamped down unevenly, as if cattle had walked through it—not a surprise.

This was clearly not some kind of accident or natural phenomenon. Someone had done it. Probably several someones, since removing the stakes could not have been easy.

Casey emitted a low whistle. “Wow. What a mess.” He kneeled and started examining some of the splintered wood and the pipes, looking at the ground, as well.

“With no tools left here, either, to show how it was done,” Melody said.

“Yeah,” he responded. “I'll request that my department send someone here to check for fingerprints, but I suspect they won't find anything.”

Melody nodded her pretty head as she kneeled beside him. “Anyone skilled enough to do this most likely has done something similar before—and knew to use gloves.”

“Could be.” He, of course, carried plastic gloves in his pocket for situations in which he didn't want to mess up any evidence, as well as a gun in his role as a deputy sheriff. “Well,” he said, “I guess I could start looking for any evidence right here, but—”

“But here's what we should do,” Melody interrupted. “Let's find those cattle. We can go on a stakeout on horseback—follow the cows, thanks to the way Clarence has made sure all his animals are tagged. Keep following them until we find them, even if it takes a few days and nights. And—”

It was Casey's turn to interrupt. “Sounds like a great idea.” Of course, he'd already been considering it—though not exactly the way she said. “And I appreciate your offer, but I'll do it on my own, starting early tomorrow.”

“Well, of course, I'll come with you,” Melody insisted. “How well do you know how to ride a horse? I'll have to pick out one for you that matches your skills, though I can handle any of them, the faster the better. I'm damn good at it, so—”

“Now, wait a minute.” Casey stood up quickly and stared down at Melody. She, too, rose and met his gaze. “I'd appreciate your allowing me to borrow one of the ranch's horses tomorrow, and maybe longer,” he said to appease her. He continued, “I'll have to see how things go before rushing back to town, so as you suggested I might camp out for a night or two, depending on what I find—or don't find. But that's me. I'm the deputy assigned to handle this investigation, and I'll do it. *Myself.*”

Her expression turned into a glare, even as she put her hands on her hips. He noticed then that her nails were short and plain. No polish on them. No lipstick on her, either. Not that she needed anything like that to look pretty. But this way she looked more like the ranch hand she was.

“Then maybe you’d better bring your own horse,” she told him coldly.

They both continued to glare at each other as his mind raced to try to figure out where he’d be able to get a horse on his own—and fast. Could he soothe her somehow in a way that ensured she’d still back off from interfering in his investigation?

She dropped her hands, even as she shook her head, a wry expression on that too-attractive face. “Look, Casey,” she said—and for just then he’d have preferred her to refer to him as “Deputy Colton.” “You’re in charge of this investigation. I understand that. But I’ll bet I can help you since I probably know this ranch, and cattle, better than you. Let’s look around a little bit now and I’ll try to convince you. But even if I don’t, please let me join you tomorrow. I really give a damn about those missing cows, and I’ll do everything I can to save them and bring them home.”

He raised his head, just a little. “Look, Ms. Hayworth.” He, at least, could return to formality. “It’s one thing for me to be out there attempting to solve this apparent crime and to go after any perpetrators as well as the missing cattle. I’m trained to do such things. It’s my job. But I don’t want to have to worry about protecting you, too.”

“Then don’t worry about it. I’m volunteering. If anything happens to me, it’s my own fault. And what if I really *can* help you?”

He recognized that this argument was going nowhere. “We’ll see,” he responded, then he moved forward to the broken fence and maneuvered his way to the property beyond, intentionally ignoring his difficult companion for the moment.

But he couldn’t really ignore her, especially when, a few feet away from him, she, too, edged her way to the far side beyond the broken fence. She started walking around, looking first into the distance, then glancing down to the ground. Then she did it again, even as Casey pretty much did the same thing.

And he saw some stuff that was interesting, like hoofprints in the grass, but unlikely to be any helpful evidence.

“Okay, Casey, look at this,” Melody called to him. She gestured for him to join her, even as she continued studying the ground.

“Look at this,” she repeated and pointed to an area right by her feet, where the grass had been tropped down and some dirt showed, similar to the ground he’d been examining, too. “See that? There are some hoofprints of cows, probably the missing ones since the prints are fairly new—sharp and prominent. They’re heading in that direction.” She pointed. “South. That’s the way we should look for them.”

Casey couldn’t help himself. He laughed. “Guess what? Your cows left hoofprints over where I was standing, too, and I was studying them when you called me to come over.”

Melody looked slightly abashed, but then her expression again became defiant. “Then, good. We’re on the same page. We can compare and help each other and—”

“I understand you want to help and I appreciate it. But like I told you—”

“Look,” she interrupted, “I know a lot more about cattle and hoofprints than you do. And more about the ranch and pastures, too.” She was being a bit repetitious. He knew that, hadn’t forgotten it. But still...

“I get all that,” he told her. “And I’ve already told you why it’s not a good idea for you to come.”

“I’ll prove otherwise,” she insisted, contradicting him again. She began moving forward quickly, her head down.

But they weren’t going to learn more now. Not here. Tomorrow he’d hurry in the same direction and hopefully find something helpful.

Maybe even those missing cattle...

“Hey. Look at that.” Melody had stopped and was looking down to what was undoubtedly more cattle hoofprints. Only, she bent and reached for something, then stopped. She looked up at him again. “I doubt that any cow dropped that,” she said.

“What?” he asked. He kneeled down beside her...and stared.

She was pointing to an area within a hoofprint, in dirt between fronds of tamped-down grass, and something small and shiny gleamed from it.

“What is that?” He resisted the urge to grab and examine it—and was glad she hadn’t done that, either.

“It looks like some kind of silver charm,” Melody responded in a somewhat hushed voice. “It could have been there before any cattle walked or stampeded around here through the fence during this rustling, but I’ve never seen anything like it in any of the pastures.”

“I think,” he mused, “and I may just be reaching for something helpful to identify some suspects and get this thing resolved, but you just might have found our first piece of evidence.”

Chapter 3

Melody was impressed, though not surprised, when Casey took a couple of pictures with his cell phone, then pulled vinyl gloves from his pocket, picked up the charm and stuck it into a small plastic bag he also carried.

Clearly, he was prepared to do his job, wherever it led him and whatever evidence he happened to find.

The charm was the kind worn on necklaces or bracelets, and appeared to be silver. It was in the shape of the letter G.

“Does this look familiar to you?” He held the bag containing the charm toward Melody.

She shook her head. “Not at all.”

But that inspired her to continue studying the ground in that area, and Casey did, too. Neither of them found anything else other than more hoofprints.

“Do you think the charm was dropped by one of the rustlers?” Melody asked the deputy as they finally gave up.

“Anything’s possible,” he said with a shrug of his wide shoulders as he shot a wry look in her direction. A frustrated look. She wished she could do something—identify the charm, find something more helpful, to ease that frustration.

But she was frustrated, too. And no solution came to her.

“Let’s head back now,” he said, shoving the bag into his pocket. “Maybe we’ll figure things out better tomorrow.”

“Absolutely,” she said, hoping it was true.

The walk back to the ranch house was a lot faster than the one to the damaged fence. But going in this direction, they didn’t need to check for any indication of where the cattle were or who’d rustled them through that fence.

Or whether there were any more charms on the ground.

Not until tomorrow.

And, yes, she would be going along with Casey. It was important to her to do the best job possible here. This ranch had become her refuge after leaving her past behind, and she adored its cattle. She intended to help to save the stolen ones. Period.

She had to give Casey credit for not grumbling or protesting when she said, as they started back, “So I assume that, as the first person to find evidence in your crime investigation, I can come along tomorrow and continue to help you.”

“I assume so,” he said resignedly. He shot her a crooked sideways smile. “And, yeah, we can do the kind of stakeout you described.”

She couldn’t help smiling back and was careful not to make it appear she was gloating. Or at least not too much.

Besides, Casey was one good-looking guy, so it wasn’t hard to smile at him.

Not that she had any intention of allowing her goal of helping to find the missing cattle by working with this guy turn into any kind of personal interest in him.

She’d learned her lesson not too long ago. It was why she had left her Texas home and found a job here, in Arizona, as a ranch hand, after her ugly, depressing divorce.

She knew now that it hadn’t been the smartest thing to marry her high-school sweetheart, Travis Ellison, and follow him to Dallas. They’d only been married a couple of years before Travis, who’d become a big-city banker, had left her for a colleague, a much younger woman named Loretta Lane.

What had made it even more heartbreaking was that Travis had told Melody she was a “country girl,” and he needed a “real woman.”

Whatever that meant, it had hurt. A lot. She had sometimes suspected the worst about Travis before then, that he was cheating on her, but since she'd thought she loved him, she'd stayed with him, hoping they could work things out. At least she'd tried, but it had also hurt that he didn't seem to care.

That insult had finally led to the inevitable end of their relationship.

And, if being a skilled and happy ranch hand meant she was a country girl, then that was fine with her.

She realized she'd somehow sped up even more as she allowed her thoughts to go—as they often did these days—in that painful direction.

“Hey, what’s your hurry?” Casey called as he caught up with her again. “Got a hot date tonight?”

She slowed a bit and turned to look into his face. His expression was teasing, yet she read some curiosity there, too. “Yeah, sure. With some horses. I need to make sure they’re taken care of, and also want to figure out which’ll be best on our stakeout.”

“Right. Good idea. But you do understand, don’t you, that I’m planning to stay out there till I—we—find those missing cattle? You can return to your place at the ranch anytime, of course, but—”

“And you’ll love it if I quit, won’t you? Well, don’t count on it. I’m in this to win, too. Those cows...well, they’re kind of my wards now. They’re mine, though I don’t own them and just care for them. That’s my job and my vocation. And I’ll do anything to bring them home safely.” Including argue with him, to save the cattle she cared for.

She was surprised that Casey stopped walking, but she did, too. She couldn’t quite interpret his expression, but he appeared impressed, somehow.

Or maybe that was what she hoped he felt.

“Bringing them home safely is my job, too. And I’m glad to have someone like you helping me.”

A warmth spread through her. He looked serious. But—

“But you didn’t want me around and only gave in because I did something helpful.”

He gave a brief laugh. “That’s the point, isn’t it? Something helpful could grow into more. Or that’s what I’m counting on. Do more of it!” He chuckled again.

“Count on it,” she said, hoping she was capable of doing what she had just promised.

“And in case you’re concerned, I understand that the stakeout you described involves sleeping outdoors for possibly several nights, camping out. I’m sure you understand that, too. But...well, if it makes you uncomfortable being alone with me that way, feel free to back out anytime and go home.”

“Same goes for you,” she said, liking his attitude...kind of. He wasn’t meeting her eyes, as if he was embarrassed. But being alone with this man, sleeping alone with him out in the open...well, yeah, it made her uncomfortable, mostly with her own feelings. Damn if she didn’t find this dedicated, uniformed sheriff’s deputy too appealing. Too sexy.

But she wouldn’t act on it, and wouldn’t allow him to, either.

And, in fact, she reminded herself—as if she needed to—she had good reason not to become attracted to him or any other man. Not now, certainly. Not so soon.

And definitely not until she got to know someone well enough to feel sure he wasn’t just playing games with this “country girl.”

“If I get too suggestive with you,” she continued, still trying to keep the conversation light, “or you become uncomfortable for any other reason, well, I’ll keep looking for my cows and you can go home.”

He laughed. “Sounds like a challenge to me. Who’ll get most uncomfortable first?”

“Not me,” Melody lied, already feeling as if, despite everything, she’d have to work hard to control her own attraction to this man.



Casey wished just then that he could read minds. That way he would learn what Melody was thinking.

The idea of their sleeping out in the pasture together didn't seem to bother her. She'd sounded quite professional. She probably didn't feel the attraction he felt toward her, which was a good thing.

As they walked quickly, her expressions changed from light and humorous, to dark and apparently introspective and sad, and he was intrigued.

But he never asked her to explain. Figured she wouldn't answer, anyway. And now, he and the lithe, lovely ranch hand had reached the main house. The single-story, deep red structure had rich-looking wood and a beige roof.

Right now, his work vehicle, a black sedan with Sur County Sheriff's Department on the front doors and a light on top, was parked out front.

Beside it was a black luxury sedan. Clarence's? Casey asked Melody. "Yes, that's his." Melody looked down at the watch on her wrist. "He usually doesn't come home until around seven, but it's only five. I wonder if he's heard anything or—"

Before she finished, the front door to the house opened and the selectman stepped onto the porch. "Hey, you two. You're back. Did you find my cattle?" He had changed from the suit Casey had seen him in earlier into a long-sleeved charcoal T-shirt with the OverHerd Ranch logo in white. He clumped down the steps in his boots. Dressed this way, he looked a lot more rustic and older than Casey was used to seeing him. He still appeared relatively slender, but the skin at the corners of his eyes sagged and lines on his forehead were appropriate for his age...or was it stress that caused them to stand out?

"Not yet, sir," Casey said as the man reached them and faced them on the paved driveway. "But—"

"Then why are you here?" Edison demanded. "Why aren't you—?"

"I began showing Deputy Colton around, sir, and we went out to the fence," Melody said. "Since we didn't see anything helpful except for how the fence was destroyed in that area, we decided to come back for the night and leave early in the morning on a stakeout of the entire ranch and beyond, if necessary, on horseback. We won't return then till we find the missing cattle."

"We'?" Clarence demanded, glaring at Melody.

Odd that, after wondering the same thing, Casey now felt he had to defend Melody and the fact he had decided not to protest any longer. He understood her rationale. And her presence might cost him time, since he would have to protect her above all else. But she was the ranch owner's employee. She had the kind of knowledge that could help him, as she'd mentioned. What she was doing could definitely be of assistance.

He noticed she didn't mention the charm she had found. Well, it might not mean anything, anyway. But he'd take care of checking into it.

"Ms. Hayworth was kind enough to offer to come along," Casey said. "We're going on horseback, and I'm sure, with her experience, she's a lot better rider than I am. Plus, she knows your land better than I do. I hope you'll allow her to come, sir. I think it will be to your advantage."

The selectman's expression changed from hard and angry to...well, resolved—and perhaps inquisitive. "And to yours, too, maybe, Deputy."

Casey saw the shock appear on Melody's face, even as he felt himself flush slightly. Had the selectman intended to be suggestive? Maybe not, but just in case, Casey said, "I intend to do my job and do it well, and I appreciate any assistance with it." He hoped he sounded strictly professional.

"Well, okay," Clarence said. "Hopefully that'll work. And I like what you said, Melody. You won't come back until you find my cattle. Right?"

"That's right." Melody looked relieved as she nodded vehemently.

"Right," Casey echoed. "So now I'll head back to town and return here early in the morning, around six thirty, okay?" He aimed his gaze at Melody.

But Clarence was the one to answer. "No, stay here tonight. We've got some apartments available in our bunkhouse, where our hands stay. And they're fairly nice, right, Melody?"

“Absolutely, Clarence,” she responded, which made Casey tilt his head slightly in confusion. She’d called him “sir” before, and now she was using his name.

Informality might be in order at the moment.

“I appreciate your invitation to stay here,” Casey said to Clarence, “but I do need to go home. I’ll need to bring the right clothing to wear on our stakeout, for one thing.” And other appropriate things, as well, particularly since he didn’t know how long they’d be out there.

“I get it,” Clarence grumbled.

Good. But if Casey could have stayed, he would have; maybe he would have met more of the ranch hands. Gained more of their input about what had happened. But that wasn’t in the cards right now.

He thanked the ranch owner and again said he’d be back bright and early the next day.

But Clarence wasn’t buying that. “Nope, that’s not happening. You can go home, get what you need and come on back as fast as you can—now. You’re going to have dinner with Melody and me right here, just the three of us so we can talk, and then you’ll stay here for the night.”

The way he spoke allowed for no argument, but that was okay with Casey. He decided he liked this idea, since they’d be able to get an earlier start in the morning. He assumed that was also why Clarence was so insistent about his staying here overnight. Still, there were a couple of things he’d need to handle first.

“I’m still on duty,” he told the older man. “And this is part of an assignment. I need to check with the sheriff first.” Which he’d intended to do, anyway, although he had no doubt Jeremy would approve this intense way of tackling his investigation.

Staying at the ranch added another level to it, but that was likely to be all right, as well.

Especially if Casey—and Melody—actually found the cattle and the people who’d taken them.

But to do the stakeout as now planned, Casey would also need to pick up the camping gear he had at his home as well as some more supplies at a local store.

When he mentioned that, Clarence put up a hand and moved it as if he was erasing what Casey said. “No need. We’ve got it all here. You’ll get it together tonight, Melody, right?”

“Of course,” she said.

But Casey remained adamant that he needed to get some things. And so, a few minutes later, he found himself in his car driving along the rural ranch-surrounded roads toward town as the sky began to turn dark. There were a few other cars that were heading in the opposite direction, but no one was heading to town, like him.

He used the Bluetooth to call the sheriff. “Yeah, Casey?” Jeremy answered. “Did you find those missing cattle? And whoever stole them?”

“Not yet, for either of them.” But Casey explained the situation to his superior officer, and how he was going to go on a stakeout with one of the ranch hands the next day.

“Would that ranch hand happen to be Melody Hayworth?” Casey could hear the suggestive tone in his boss’s voice.

What was it with guys? Casey thought. Did they not believe in his professionalism?

Or did they find Melody as attractive as he did, and therefore let their imaginations run wild—their jealous imaginations?

Maybe he would change his mind and give it a try...

No. He was a professional. And clearly Melody was, too.

“It is Melody,” Casey said in as formal a tone as he could muster. “She’s good with horses, and she knows the ranch.” Great reasons, even though talking about them was feeling a bit stale to Casey right now. “But looking for the cattle and the thieves—that’s all we’re up to. And I’ll keep you informed.”

But he realized as he hung up that he’d need to make a stop at the department to have one of the evidence guys check the charm for prints or origin, in case it could help lead to the perpetrator.

And there was something scratching at the back of his mind about it—but that was probably just because he hoped it would lead to something.

He still had a little ways to go before reaching the discount store he was heading to first, so he made another call, this time to Everett, who worked for the FBI in Phoenix. Everett was older by a couple of minutes, and they didn't look much alike. And for twins, their personalities weren't much the same, though they'd both gone into law enforcement.

"Hey, bro, what's up?" Everett said as he answered.

"On an interesting case," Casey replied, then described the cattle rustling and how he was attempting to find the missing animals and solve the situation.

He didn't mention that the ranch hand helping him was a woman, though. He'd never hear the end of it from Everett.

"I'll be out on a stakeout for as long as it takes," he informed his brother. "The ranch's owner has things set up so I should have power for my phone, but I haven't tried that yet."

"Well, better call the folks before you go, to let them know what you're up to in case you become unreachable."

Which Casey did next. He'd reached the store's parking lot, so he sat there as he talked to their parents, who both got on the phone.

Neither of them was in law enforcement. Dr. Ryker Colton, their dad, was an oncologist in town, and their mom, Maribelle Colton, ran the Cactus Creek post office.

As he finished and told them he was probably—but not absolutely—going to be reachable over the next few days, his father said in his aging scratchy voice, "Now, you be careful, son. Got it?"

"Got it, Dad."

"That won't keep you from coming for Thanksgiving dinner, or Christmas dinner?" his mom asked, her tone a sweet chirp, as always. "You know we'll want you to come. And... well, if you'd like to bring someone for Christmas, that's fine."

"Thanks, Mom," he said. "There shouldn't be any problem with my being there for either one." After all, Thanksgiving was a couple of weeks away, and Christmas even farther away. "And if I think of anyone to invite, I'll let you know." His mind had flown immediately to Melody, of course. But he didn't know if she had family here, or friends she'd want to spend the holiday with.

Besides, under these circumstances... well, he'd just have to see.

Chapter 4

Melody wasn't sure what she'd expected dinner to be like with just the three of them—herself, Clarence and Casey—that night, so she wasn't surprised. But this felt unique.

And worrisome.

What if Casey and she didn't find the cattle and the people who'd stolen them? What if the stock weren't returned, especially after she'd sort of been singled out like this to help handle the situation?

They sat in Clarence's posh dining room, with its antique wooden table and chairs, a tall, matching buffet against the wall and a glimmering chandelier hanging over the table. Melody felt she should have worn something dressier, but the men with her also wore casual clothing. When Casey had gone home to grab what he'd need while camping out, he had changed into jeans and a deep blue long-sleeved T-shirt that hugged his chest—and he looked hunky in it. She had to make sure she didn't stare.

He was likely to wear that and similar clothes on their stakeout, although he'd need to keep at least his ID with him to show he was a deputy if—and when—they found the rustlers. Probably his gun, too. She would stay as remote as appropriate from him mentally, even though they would be physically near each other.

The large room was filled with the aroma of what was being cooked next door in the kitchen. Melody suspected she hadn't met everyone who worked here even now, after six months. Did Clarence have a special cook? Or was the person who prepared their food the same housekeeper who served it?

The housekeeper—Grace—was also dressed casually, in a long-sleeved black OverHerd Ranch T-shirt and jeans. She acted utterly friendly as she provided them each with a salad, a side of cheesy potatoes and, of course, a delicious steak. What else, at an Angus cattle ranch?

Melody had never dined in the main house before, had hardly spent any time here. There was a small kitchen and dining area in the bunkhouse where she lived and had numerous meals with her fellow ranch hands. That had seemed quite adequate since she'd begun working here. Clarence had always seemed nice enough, but she'd never felt close to her boss—nor should she.

“So how long have you been with the Sur County Sheriff's Department?” Clarence had started to quiz Casey from the moment they'd sat down.

“Five years,” he said. “It's a good place to work. The sheriff's good at what he does, and—”

“Yeah, I know that. I help him keep his job.”

Melody felt herself blink, though not in surprise. Was that true? Or was it only Clarence's ego speaking? He had a big one.

“That's nice of you.” She could hear the irony in Casey's voice and decided to change the subject.

“Clarence,” she began, “you know we're going to start out early tomorrow. If there's anything you especially want us to do to find the missing cattle, we'd love to hear your suggestions.”

“You'll be using the GPS, I trust.”

She nodded, aiming a brief glance toward Casey, who looked amused somehow. “Yes. I've got the app on my phone like all the ranch hands, though I didn't use it when Deputy Colton and I were out there by the damaged fence. We did see a lot of hoofprints that indicated the direction the cattle had gone, so that's where we'll start out tomorrow.”

“How about you, Casey?” Clarence asked. “Do you have the app on your phone? I made sure signals are available way out in all my pastures so cell phones work out there.”

“I don't have the app,” he said. “But I'd be happy to download it before we go.”

“Right,” Clarence said.

When Melody again glanced toward Casey, the deputy was looking at her, his expressive blue eyes making it clear he wanted to get out of there.

“Are you about finished with dinner?” the deputy asked as he glanced down at her nearly empty plate.

“I certainly am,” she replied. “Because we need to get up early—really early, since I’ll want to have a little time to make sure the horse we choose for you is the right one. I think we should head...” She hesitated for a moment, because she’d been planning on saying “head to bed,” but that could sound suggestive. “Head to our rooms in the bunkhouse right away.”

“Then I’ll say good-night now,” Clarence said. “Thanks to both of you, and keep me informed of your progress tomorrow.”



It was six o’clock in the morning. Casey had awakened a while ago, showered, dressed and taken the things he had brought for their camping-and-stakeout expedition out to the bunkhouse lobby.

When they had arrived there last night, Melody had shown him to a small apartment on the second floor and given him a key. She’d let him know that her room was on the same floor but down the hall. He had gone out to his car—his own SUV—to retrieve the items he planned to take along.

When he’d come back in, he’d seen a couple of the guys including Pierce, whom he’d met before, and another fellow named Roger. They’d confirmed that the additional ranch hands had remained camping out in the pastures with the other cattle. Both of them indicated they’d be out in the pastures today, too. But Pierce seemed a bit displeased, hinting at his own desire to get out there and find the missing cattle. Casey thanked him but said that wasn’t a great idea—particularly since he, a deputy sheriff, would be out there working on the situation, with help from another ranch hand. Pierce had agreed that was the better scenario.

Maybe Pierce and Roger had already headed out this morning, since neither appeared when Casey brought out his things and waited for Melody, who’d apparently already been there. His equipment, which he’d packed in the burlap bags some of the stuff had come in, wasn’t the only camping gear in the lobby. There were a couple of substantial-sized saddle packs right by the front door that he assumed were Melody’s.

But where was she? Should he text her? Call her? Maybe he should go to the kitchen to see what he could grab for breakfast, or maybe that’s what she was doing. He’d be happy to see her again before they headed out.

He’d be happy to be with her then, too—which concerned him. He shouldn’t have to remind himself to remain professional.

He started down the first-floor hallway in the direction he believed the kitchen was located and saw Melody emerge from a door at the end, her hands full.

“Good morning,” she called, not muffling her voice at all. He figured no one else was there. She would be the one to know it.

She strode down the hallway and entered the lobby. Her black hair was once again pulled back into a ponytail, although she’d worn it somewhat looser last night at dinner. She again wore a blue denim work shirt and jeans, though her shirt this time was darker in color and unbuttoned partway down the front to show a navy T-shirt below.

She looked damn pretty in it, despite how casual this outfit was, too.

He suspected she would look damn pretty in any outfit. Or none at all...

He immediately tamped down that thought. *Be professional*, he again reminded himself.

“I’ve got some stuff here for us to eat,” she told him as she reached him. “Croissants and jelly. We can go wolf it down now with some coffee, if you’d like, before we go visit the horses. But we’ll need to be fast.”

“Sounds good. Is it okay to leave this stuff here?” He pointed to the small pile he had placed on the floor.

“It’s fine. We’ll be back soon.”

Which they were. Their breakfast, unaccompanied by other ranch hands, took only about ten minutes.

He considered the kinds of food they'd eat out on the trail and figured she must have some items in her saddlebags.

Him? He'd picked up some dried fruit and beef jerky and energy bars—nothing that would go bad, and it could all be carried fairly easily.

Who knew how long they would be out in the pastures hunting cattle and people?

When they were finished, Melody helped Casey to download the GPS app onto his phone. She then told him to follow her to the stable. She picked up her saddlebags before he could grab them and she didn't seem inclined to allow him to be a gentleman and carry them along with his own stuff. She tossed him a slightly irritated look, which told him that any old-fashioned etiquette wouldn't be welcome around her.

He hid his smile. He liked that about her.

He was liking too many things about her.

For now, he closed the bunkhouse door behind him and followed her along the paved pathway across this part of the ranch behind the main house.

Melody opened the stable door fairly easily, it appeared, despite how full her arms were. Once inside, she placed her saddlebags down on the hay-covered ground and closed the door again behind Casey.

There were seven horses in separate stalls, though a few stalls were empty and he figured that was because of the ranch hands who had ridden off to the pastures to protect the remaining cattle.

"We need to do this scientifically," Melody said, standing beside him. There was a humorous catch to her voice. "Let's start with this. Have you ever ridden a horse before?"

"Well, yes, sort of." Smiling wryly down at her, he described the few times he had ridden at commercial riding areas in parks, and at family friends' farms as a child, along with his brother, and also occasionally at county fairs and the like. "No real riding on trails out in the countryside, though."

"Got it. And I also know who's best for you. Witchy's the horse here who's the least challenge to newbie riders." She led him over to a red-and-white horse a few stalls down.

"Really? A horse named Witchy is fairly tame?"

"Yes. We'll try her. Me, I'll take my favorite—Cal." She looked back toward Casey and grinned at him in a way that made him anticipate what she'd say next. "That's short for Calamity."

Casey couldn't help it. He laughed. "Sounds like we're headed for some wild riding. Witchy and Calamity."

"You got it," Melody said. "Now, let me get them saddled up and we'll try them out in the paddock outside. I'll also show you a bit of grooming and other things you'll need to know when we're out on the trail. Still, if all goes as I anticipate, we should be good to start our expedition in twenty minutes."



"You're doing great!" Melody called to Casey a few minutes later, meaning it.

She was seated on top of Cal, a sleek brown quarter horse and her favorite mount, while watching Casey trot around the perimeter of the corral on top of Witchy, a gentle and friendly pinto. The deputy sat tall in the saddle and appeared perfectly at home as he gently pulled the reins now and then to get Witchy to turn around and head in the other direction.

He'd seemed to have gotten the hang of it from the moment he had put his left foot into the stirrup and lifted himself into the saddle. Witchy's head had turned just a bit to see who her rider would be. The mare seemed fine with it, and Melody had only given Casey a few cues about how to remain seated comfortably and maneuver the reins to direct the mare.

She also told Casey how to gently squeeze with his heels to tell Witchy to speed up, and showed him how to click a bit with his tongue if he wanted her to go even faster.

As always, Melody appreciated being outdoors, listening to the clomping of hoofbeats at different speeds on the hard corral turf. She smiled, closing her eyes for a moment as she lifted her chin toward the sky. She felt alive here, and free.

This part, at least, was fun. And when she opened her eyes she saw that Casey had slowed Witchy down and was staring at her...and smiling, too. She looked down and shook her head, and directed Cal, with her heels, to start walking.

After a short while, Melody asked Cal to begin trotting as she directed him to get in front of Witchy. Then she urged him even further, and Cal began galloping around the corral, his mane blowing as he moved.

Melody glanced behind her. Yes, Witchy and Casey were keeping up. Not surprising, but it confirmed what she was thinking: it was time for them to head off to that critical pasture.

Chapter 5

They had almost returned to the site of the mutilated fence. It had taken much less time today, thanks to the horses and their speedier gaits.

Casey was happy to be on horseback. He liked Witchy and felt he was doing an okay job playing cowboy, as he rode this calm, obedient and enjoyable steed along the uneven, mostly grassy terrain.

Even more, he was enjoying watching his companion on this ride, Melody, on her somewhat more energetic equine, Cal.

She seemed more at home here, somehow, intensely watching their surroundings and handling her reins, gently guiding her mount in the direction she wanted. She wore a cap now, a blue denim one that matched her shirt, a lighter color than her jeans. He, too, wore a cap, with his sheriff's department logo on it—the only current indication of his status as a deputy. But he needed the shading of his face from the sun, which was bound to become even more intense as the day grew later.

It was still early in the morning, around nine, and the air was clear and a bit cool for Arizona, not surprising in November. An airplane flew high overhead in the blue sky, and Casey wondered for a moment which airport it had come from and where it was going. It appeared to be flying north, so maybe it had just taken off from Tucson International.

Reflexively, as he'd done often during this ride, he glanced behind himself at one of the two very large, but not particularly heavy, saddlebags Melody and he had filled. The other was attached to her saddle, similarly behind her. With her instruction, they'd fastened them on their mounts before leaving the stable. His contained a small tent in case they had to sleep outside for a night or two, which wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. Each of them also contained lightweight, closely folded sleeping bags.

The most bulky and necessary items they'd included were water bottles, although Melody had assured him that she knew where some creeks—perhaps including the one the town of Cactus Creek had been named for—were located. They could utilize these creeks for water, which they could purify with her portable water filter. That way, they should be able to keep their own water bottles filled, as well as making sure the horses had drinkable water.

And possibly the most important thing? His duty belt was hidden inside that saddlebag. It contained items he hoped he wouldn't need, but would be crucial if he did, including his gun. He'd also stuck his wallet and badge inside in case he needed money or to identify himself, though he kept his phone in his pocket since he figured he might need it quicker than the rest.

He'd fortunately had time to take that charm Melody had found to the sheriff's department to examine it and determine its likely source, as well as check it for fingerprints. They'd be passing the area where she found it soon, which he thought about now. If it turned out that the charm belonged to one of the perpetrators, it might be useful as evidence, but that remained to be determined.

And something about the charm was still tugging at his mind, though he remained unsure why.

"How are you doing?" Melody's voice came from beside him. She looked great on that horse, sitting tall, the reins held in her right hand, her jeans-clad legs hugging Cal's sides and her black boots in the stirrups. Her ponytail waved beneath her cap in the breeze as they moved forward.

Of course, Casey recognized that she looked great when not on horseback, too.

And despite knowing full well and even vocalizing that they were both there on business and would remain professional, he knew he'd have to be careful if they spent nights out here together to keep it that way.

"I'm fine," he said. "Wish I'd learned to ride a horse this way before."

"So you're having fun." Her words were a statement, and her smile was one of the biggest Casey had ever seen.

One of the prettiest, too.

Okay, he told himself sternly. You like this woman. You like her appearance—and more. But keep it all to yourself.

“Yeah,” he responded. “Definitely fun.”

“So here we are,” Melody said as they arrived at the fence. “Our starting point, sort of. We’ll head in the direction those hoofprints lead us.”

“Let’s check the GPS app.”

Just before they’d headed out to the pasture, she had helped Casey download the GPS app, then shown him what the GPS portion of the tags attached to the cattle had looked like on her phone’s map—a group of small, overlaid dots in one location. But without streets or even an indication as to what part of the open land the dots were located in, other than a rough idea of the terrain if the right part of the app was on, it didn’t seem to Casey as if the GPS would be of much help except maybe to provide a general direction. But as with a lot around here, Melody was much more experienced and skilled in such things than he. He’d looked on his own phone and found the map, too.

“Good idea,” she responded. “Let’s do it before we head any further.”

She’d apparently put her phone in her pocket, too, and pulled it out now. As she did, something else fell from her pocket—her wallet.

“Damn.” She started to dismount.

“Here, let me,” Casey said. “I’ll pick it up while you check the GPS.”

“Thanks.” She nodded at him. “That’ll save us a small bit of time. I assume you’re skilled enough now to get on and off Witchy without my guidance.”

“I assume so, too.” He pulled his right foot from the stirrup, then lifted his right leg to move it around to the same side of the horse as his left one. Mounting and dismounting hadn’t been that hard to start with, but he did feel as if the little bit of practice he’d been getting made him somewhat of a pro, like Melody.

Her wallet was in some grass just off to Cal’s right side, and Melody’s horse stomped a little as if he was uneasy to have Casey walking around. “It’s okay.” Casey stroked the brown quarter horse’s side in front of Melody’s leg, enjoying the feel of the soft coat. Cal seemed to quiet down immediately, and Casey bent to pick up the beige leather case.

As he did so, he noticed that the strap that normally held the two sides together was unsnapped, and before he could get it back together he saw Melody’s driver’s license inside. He barely glanced at it at first, but did a double take when he saw that it was a Texas license—the address wasn’t in Cactus Creek, it was in Dallas. Understandable. Though she’d been here for six months, she must not have gotten herself a new one yet since moving here for this job.

But the more startling thing was...well, did this belong to this Melody? The picture was hers, and so was the first name, but the last name wasn’t Hayworth, it was Ellison. Was she married? Using an alias for some reason? What was going on?

And how was he going to ask her?

He wouldn’t. Not now. Whoever she was, and whatever her name, she clearly worked for OverHerd Ranch. The name situation was personal, since he’d no reason to suspect her of any crime—None of his business, despite his curiosity.

“Here we are,” he said brightly, holding out the now-fastened wallet to her.

“Thanks,” she said. “And better get back up on Witchy. We’re going to have a long day still, out here following the missing herd.”

“Why? Are they on the move?”

“Looks that way,” Melody affirmed. “And they’re heading even farther from this area. The ranch is five hundred acres, a lot of it in that direction.” She waved in front of them as he mounted Witchy once more. “But my suspicion is that those missing cattle are beyond that far end already or will get there soon.”



Melody found herself looking away immediately as Casey handed back her wallet. Had he opened it? Was he that nosy?

Of course, it could have opened by itself when it fell from her pocket.

Maybe she should have shoved it into her saddlebag back at the stable, but she liked having a couple of things on her—her phone and her wallet.

She hadn't noticed whether he'd snooped into it or not, of course. She'd been studying the GPS map on her phone app, as much as she could, at least. The map sort of indicated major differences in the terrain such as deep ravines, moderate hills and high mountains, but not minor things like the usual rolling hillsides, waterways like streams, or any landmarks, although she wasn't aware of any out here. But it did provide the general direction of where the cattle were heading, and the distance of maybe fifteen or more miles from her current location with Casey.

Now she knew the cattle were farther away than they'd been, as well as the direction they'd gone, but whether Casey and she could follow directly would depend on that unfamiliar terrain. And if she was correct in her interpretation, they'd at least come to steep hills on the way that they'd navigate.

Melody now felt certain they would be spending at least this night out in a pasture on the way to catching up with the missing herd. She'd ridden out this way several times before since beginning work here, just to get the lay of the land, with one or more of the other hands with her. But she was far from knowledgeable with regard to the actual topography.

"I'm not really sure how difficult our route will be," she told Casey when he was back in the saddle and they were moving again. "Although the direction we're taking still looks right."

"Guess we'll just have to figure the rest out as it comes." His tone was somewhat curt, and she wondered why.

If he had been nosy enough to look in her wallet, he might have questions he wasn't asking aloud. Just as well. Since she had just finalized her divorce six months ago, her old Texas license still had her married name—Ellison. Thanks to the nasty, cheating jerk she'd been married to.

Which was dumb on her part, in many ways. She never should have married him in the first place. And once she had, she should have ended it faster. She'd had a sense sometimes that Travis was cheating on her, and it had hurt.

Well, at least being called a "country girl" had helped her make that final decision, and now she appreciated that, as a ranch hand here, she really was a country girl.

But one of the first things she should have done upon moving to Arizona was to at least get a new driver's license, so she'd never have to look at that old, unwanted name again.

At least Clarence had accepted her official divorce documents and hired her under her real name, which she'd returned to using, Melody Hayworth.

But she'd become so involved in her new job, so busy...well, that was her excuse, anyway.

And now, with this reminder, true or not, she knew she would do something about it soon.

Should she bring up the subject, explain it now to Casey?

No. If he'd been snooping, that was his problem. And she hadn't talked about her prior life much since she'd moved here, didn't necessarily want to do so now. Wanted to keep that difficult time behind her. She had definitely moved on.

If Casey asked about it, she'd answer. But right now, he just seemed to be quiet and didn't interrogate her as a sheriff's deputy might.

Not that her prior ID should have made him suspicious of anything. She was a good, law-abiding citizen who was now trying to find whoever had stolen her employer's valuable cattle, get those cattle back to the ranch where she worked and then go about her usual life once more. She hadn't been involved in the theft, and to her knowledge no one had even considered the remote possibility that she was.

Except, perhaps, for Casey. He was a law-enforcement officer and he might have seen something that didn't quite fit with what he'd previously been told.

Whether or not that was the case, it now felt uncomfortable just riding beside Casey so quietly. They'd at least chatted before about the pasture and where the other cattle were currently ranging and what it was like to work on a ranch.

Working on a ranch. She had an idea how to start a potentially lighthearted conversation.

"Okay." She glanced over at Casey. His handsome face, which looked as if it had been chiseled from stone, was expressionless as he stared forward. Then he turned his head to look at her.

"Okay' what?" he asked, still straight-faced.

"I like how you're now doing on horseback out here. Let's see how you do when we find the cattle. Of course, you're the law-enforcement guy and I know you'll need to take the thieves into custody."

"I intend to," he said, remaining solemn. "If there are a lot of them, I'll call for backup, assuming I get phone service out here as Clarence said we would, and if not we'll just follow carefully behind them until I can get a team to join us and arrest them."

"Right. But meantime, I'm now considering that you should have an alternate career. You're doing great riding. I'll have to see how you do with the cattle when we find them, but you look good up there, sitting on the horse and scouring the pasture with your gaze. I think you should consider becoming a ranch hand. Maybe even a cowboy yourself someday."

He pulled slightly on Witchy's reins, stopping her.

"You're kidding." He stared at Melody, and she stopped Cal. Casey's brown eyebrows arched even higher over his attractive blue eyes, a quizzical expression on his face—a good change from before, when he had no expression at all.

"Could be." She grinned widely at him. Then she attempted to grow more serious. "But what do you think of being here on the ranch? I mean, if you weren't trying to find stolen cattle, would you like riding here? Not just riding a horse, but riding one in this kind of environment? You don't necessarily have to herd cattle to be here, either."

"So you think I should become a ranch hand? You don't think I'm a good sheriff's deputy?"

She laughed and gently kicked Cal to get him moving again. Casey also gave Witchy a slight nudge so she started walking again, too.

Melody then looked at Casey. "I'm still sizing you up, Deputy. As far as I know, you're good at what you do. I think you'd be good at this, too. Could be that you can handle anything that life throws your way, right?"

"That's what I believe. In fact, I'm sure of it, but—"

"Great. I wanted to be sure that the man accompanying me on this potentially dangerous outing is smart and brave enough to handle it."

"I assumed you already thought so or we wouldn't be out here like this."

"As I said, I wanted to be sure." With that, she again gently kicked her horse and Cal's speed increased.

So did Witchy's, beside them.

Oh, yes, she'd already accepted that Casey was one good deputy, or his boss wouldn't have allowed him to be the one to take on this chase out here in the kind-of wilderness. To be the one to find the bad guys in this situation and either take them down himself—with her limited help—or get some colleagues to sneak in wherever they happened to be and help him out.

But all she'd wanted to do now was get them talking again. In a friendly manner.

Maybe also get him to reveal what was on his mind, although she believed she knew that part.

Why not just ask him? She might, if he continued to remain less friendly than he'd been before. It didn't make sense to be out here with someone who perhaps had some suspicions or concerns about her and didn't reveal them.

And...well, heck. She didn't really know much about him, either. Only that he was an officer of the law who'd been given this difficult assignment, including working with an unknown: her. She'd liked him before, and he'd seemed to like her.

And now? Well, who knew? But did she want to spend more time with this man out here without them getting along well?

Should she attempt to fix it by telling him all about her prior life?

Maybe so. But she wouldn't unless he asked.

Though she could find out more about him by asking some questions of her own—eventually. But not now. Not until she could think this through.



What had that been all about? Casey wondered. Although he thought he might know.

She might have seen him peek into her wallet after all, even though she appeared to be engrossed in checking out the cattle GPS.

But why hadn't she just asked him?

Or should he have been the one to bring it up first?

Maybe so. And maybe he would bring it up sometime. For now, though...

Their horses were walking fairly fast, but the ground below them had started to become rougher, and he felt it in the way the saddle bumped his butt harder now as his horse's hooves hit the uneven surface. He pulled slightly on Witchy's reins. "Slow down, girl," he said, then looked ahead as Melody, on Cal, passed them. "Yeah, you, too," he called to his favorite—and somewhat difficult, at least right now—ranch hand. "Slow down." *And you, too. Call "whoa" on your attraction to Melody.*

Chapter 6

The warming Arizona day seemed to progress quickly as they continued to track the cattle.

They remained on horseback and though they were still in grassy pastures, they headed in the direction of some canyon areas filled with bushes and trees, which Melody considered a good thing. If they found the right spot, there might be some cover for where they'd ultimately sleep that night. And if she remembered correctly, there was also a small stream in that area, where they and the horses could get more to drink than they'd found earlier today, once it was filtered. Plus, she and Casey could also wash themselves.

They'd already come across other spots today where the terrain was irregular or the plant life was more vibrant—a good thing for when they needed breaks way out here in the middle of nowhere.

Melody had enjoyed the conversations they'd been holding; at her urging, they discussed things in their lives—some of the time, at least—that had brought them to where they were today.

“Do you like to see wildlife in the outdoors?” was one of the questions Melody asked Casey.

“I'm always after people who live a wild life,” he said, making her laugh. “But if you mean do I like to see birds and animals and all out here, the answer is yes.”

“Me, too,” Melody told him, and they talked a while about visiting areas like this and various sanctuaries and zoos in their childhoods.

And Casey's enjoyment of animals upped him even farther in Melody's already climbing opinion of him.

Melody didn't bring up her divorce. She didn't even want to think about it.

Mostly, she peppered Casey with additional questions. Somewhat to her surprise, he didn't want to talk much about anything personal, either. His attitude might be forthcoming and professional, but he seemed almost shy as he responded in few words at first to her repeated questions about why he'd become a peace officer. Because he wanted to. Because it was a childhood dream. She considered that sweet. In fact, she was finding him *much* too sweet and appealing.

But that didn't keep her from pushing for more detailed answers when he attempted to change the subject. Besides, she was curious.

“Okay,” he finally said. “It's no big deal, but if you really want to know...”

“I do.”

“I grew up here in Cactus Creek,” he told her, somewhat softly. He didn't meet her eyes as he spoke, and instead looked into the distance, as if viewing the area he spoke of. Maybe he was, in his head. “It's a great town, but like everywhere else there are good people and bad people. And I wanted to be out there helping to bring justice to my town. I got a degree in criminal justice from Arizona State and visited home as often as I could during the school years. I returned here full-time as quickly as I could and was hired as a deputy sheriff right away.”

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