



Western Romance®

A man with a mustache and goatee, wearing a brown cowboy hat and a blue and white plaid button-down shirt with rolled-up sleeves, leans on a metal railing. He is wearing a dark leather belt with a large, ornate silver buckle and blue jeans. The background is a vast, open field with rolling hills under a blue sky with light clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

**THE BULL
RIDER'S PLAN**

JEANNIE WATT

Mills & Boon Western Romance

Jeannie Watt

The Bull Rider's Plan

«HarperCollins»

Watt J.

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ONE WILD RIDE After careful planning, Jess Hayward is finally hitting the bull riding circuit to chase his dreams. There's just one complication—he's agreed to bring along his late best friend's little sister, Emma Sullivan. Jess could use a second driver, and after calling off her wedding, Emma needs an escape. It's a win-win arrangement...in theory. Free-spirited and impulsive, Emma is the exact opposite of Jess—a problem he's anticipating on the road. Only she's not the annoying little tag-a-long he remembers. And the intense attraction between them is no childhood crush. If Jess wants to be a champion, he needs to keep his head in the game. But lately all he can think about is Emma...

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"Take me with you." The words came out before the thought was formed.

The look on Jess's face was priceless. It also ticked Emma off. "I'm not kidding."

"You can't come with me."

"Why?"

"For all the reasons I've given over the years when you wanted to come along with me and Len."

"I'm not underage anymore." She was twenty-five, but he probably didn't realize that. He started to speak, but she interrupted. "I can drive part-time, which will come in handy if you get yourself all beat up, which is a very real possibility." He opened his mouth again, and again she jumped in. "I have a little money socked away. Not enough to start a new life, as I'd hoped, but enough to buy food for myself for four weeks."

Jess eyed her, obviously waiting for her to run out of steam before telling her no way.

"You can buy the gas, because you'd be doing that no matter what."

Jess waited a few more seconds, then said, "Are you done." It was a statement rather than a question.

[Dear Reader,](#)

I knew five sets of identical twins growing up. I went to prom with an identical twin. Several years later, my husband and I were watching a television show about identical twins who married identical twins at the twin gathering in Twinsville, Ohio. I was able to point at the screen and say, "The one on the left was my prom date." I could tell them apart even then. Funny thing, once you get to know identical twins, they don't look so much alike.

I truly enjoyed writing my twins stories—The Bull Rider's Plan and A Bull Rider to Depend On. Jess and Tyler Hayward look alike, but they have opposite personalities—like many of the identical twins I know—so I was able to craft two very different stories. Tyler was a wild child who depended on his brother to bail him out of trouble, and Jess is the responsible twin who needs to loosen up and follow his dream. Writing Jess's story was particularly fun because I gave him a heroine, Emma, guaranteed to drive him crazy. Jess needed some crazy in his life, although in the beginning he would not have agreed with me.

I hope you enjoy reading Jess's story. Please feel free to stop by my website, jeanniewatt.com, to learn more about me and my books or to sign up for my newsletter. I'd love to hear from you!

Happy reading!

Jeannie

The Bull Rider's Plan

Jeannie Watt



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JEANNIE WATT lives in southwest Montana on a small cattle ranch and hay farm. Before moving to Montana, she spent many years living off the grid in Nevada ranch country and teaching at a rural school. When she's not writing, Jeannie enjoys running, sewing, reading and having electricity available at the flip of a switch.

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To Jake, the best calf rider in the family.

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[Chapter One](#)

There were times when a guy needed to be alone with his thoughts.

This wasn't one of them.

Loud voices and louder music washed over Jess Hayward as he pulled open the rear door of the Shamrock Pub and stepped inside out of the light June rain. After too many nights spent alone, second-guessing himself, he wanted noise and lots of it. A way to shut off his brain and focus on things other than the fact that he'd just given up a steady job to follow the rodeo for four weeks.

It was the right choice. His twin brother was tearing up the professional bull-rider circuit, and Jess knew he should take a shot before it was too late. He was a good bull rider, better than Tyler in some respects, but he was also cautious—not about rough stock, but he did have a backup plan

for when things went awry. That was why he was going the rodeo route. If things worked out, he'd join his brother on the pro circuit come January. If not, he'd go back to work for the construction company that sent him all over Montana overseeing the assembly of steel-framed buildings.

But even though he'd made his decision, it was surprisingly hard to shut off the voice of sanity and reason—possibly because for most of his life he'd been that voice for both himself and his brother. Tyler had a penchant for wild behavior—or he had until he hooked up with his now-wife, Skye Larkin. Jess was no saint, but compared to Ty, he was...well...kind of boring.

No. Not boring. Careful.

He crossed the crowded floor to where his friend Gus Hawkins was standing behind the bar. He waited his turn behind a group of college girls, smiling at one of them when she turned and gave him a flirtatious once-over. Apparently, she liked what she saw.

“Hi,” she said with a dimpled smile. “I’m Talia.”

“Jess.”

Talia’s friend turned and pushed a drink into her hand, then made a gesture toward a group of guys on the other side of the room. Talia gave a helpless shrug as her friend grabbed her wrist and started pulling her away.

“Maybe I’ll see you later,” she called with a laugh before disappearing into the crowd.

Maybe. It’d been a while since he’d dated anyone and he felt kind of rusty. Something about twelve-hour days and being on the road too much. Well, he was about to be on the road too much again, but in a different way.

“This is a surprise,” Gus said as Jess stepped forward to rest his hands on the edge of the bar. “For a minute, I thought you were Tyler.”

“Easy mistake to make.” Even their mom made it sometimes.

“Because even though he’s on the road most of the time, I still see more of him than I do of you.”

“And that will continue,” Jess said. “I’m hitting the rodeo circuit.”

Gus gave a satisfied grunt. “Finally.”

“It’s now or never. The body’s not getting any younger.” Taking a beating on a bull was truly an occupation for the young.

Gus set a glass in front of him and poured a shot. “On me. For luck. How are you traveling?”

“Bedroll in the back of my truck.”

Gus held up a finger before moving away to take an order from an old guy in a cowboy hat. He drifted back toward Jess and said, “Take my camper. I’m not using it. I’m just too lazy to sell the thing online.”

“That would be...great.” It would certainly beat the bedroll in the back of the truck, which was how he and his brother had operated during the three years on the Montana circuit before Tyler went pro and their parents sold the family ranch and moved to Texas. At that point, Jess realized that neither he nor Tyler would have a place to live if one of them didn’t get a full-time job and keep the home fires burning. Tyler hadn’t really needed home fires, because he was rarely at home. When he finally did come home for a spell, he’d moved onto a neighboring ranch and had become engaged to the owner.

That had been a turning point. That had been when Jess decided that maybe he did have enough money in the bank. That he was only responsible for himself, which was an odd feeling for an identical twin.

“When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow afternoon for Union City.”

“Come by and see the camper tomorrow morning. If it’ll work, take it.”

“I’ll pay you—”

Gus leveled a deadly look at him. “I don’t think you will.”

Jess simply nodded. He'd pay something if he used the camper, but he'd wait until he got back rather than argue with Gus now. He continued to stand at the bar, talking to Gus as he drank. Across the room, Talia smiled at him and raised her glass in a small salute. He smiled back, thinking it might be time to make his move. But before he could push off the bar, a small crash at the other end made his head jerk around.

Emma Sullivan's wide gray gaze came up from the mess of broken glass and beer on the bar. She instantly started apologizing to Gus's uncle Thad, who was standing only a few feet away.

"I'm so sorry. That guy bumped into me." She began stacking the smaller pieces of glass onto the larger pieces as she attempted to clear the mess.

"No harm done—or there won't be if you stop trying to pick up the glass," Thad said sternly.

"Sorry." Emma pulled her hands to her chest, holding her fists against the blue-gray sweater she wore. Her eyes came up again and this time she zeroed straight in on Jess. Her lips parted as she recognized him, then she looked over her shoulder at the door.

Excellent. Unless he was misreading the signs, Emma, his late best friend's little sister, had had too much to drink.

He set down his whiskey. "I'll be back," he said to Gus. Just as soon as he made certain that Emma wasn't alone.

"Jess," she said as he approached. She attempted to sound offhand, but the end of his name came out just slurred enough to confirm his suspicions.

"Are you here with someone?" he asked, reaching out to take her elbow as someone jostled her from behind, making him think that her story about the guy bumping her was true.

"Watch it," he growled. The guy turned, half ready to defend himself until he saw the deadly look in Jess's eyes. He gave a grunt and moved a few feet away. Jess turned back to Emma. "Are you here alone?"

"I came with Jonesy, but I haven't seen her in a while. I think she might have left with someone." She spoke the last part in a stage whisper that had Jess rolling his eyes.

A table close to them emptied and he gestured toward it. "Sit. I have to get my drink."

Drawing in a breath, he headed to the other end of the bar, retrieved his whiskey, which he might as well enjoy, because it might be his last drink of the evening, and headed back to where Emma sat with her elbows on the table.

"What's going on, Em?"

"My drink spilled when that guy bumped me." She gave him an encouraging look. "I could use another."

"I'm not buying you a drink." He refrained from saying she'd had too many, because nothing brought out the fight in Em like being told she couldn't do something. Or that she had to do something. Something about being one of the youngest members of a large blended family. Her stepmom had her hands full raising a lot of kids, but that didn't keep her from trying to control every move they made.

She tightened one corner of her mouth, which was wide and full and frosted with shimmery stuff. He used to tease her about her mouth being too big for her face, but he'd been wrong. She'd finally grown into that smart mouth of hers. It looked...good. And the corners were once again drooping.

"Selma is driving me crazy," she suddenly blurted, as if needing to explain why she was in the Shamrock alone, having a few. "I need to get married to get her off my back."

Jess downed the rest of his whiskey and considered ordering another. Across the room he saw Talia flirting with another guy, then turned his attention back to Em. "Are you thinking about getting back with Darion?"

"No." The word came out flatly. Adamantly. Her broken engagement would stay broken. "But that's not slowing Selma down. If she doesn't quit hounding me, I'm going to—" she moved her hands back and forth in a gesture of frustration "—do something."

“Wait a minute. She wants you to patch things up with Darion?” Which wasn’t the same as Darion wanting to patch things up.

Em leaned closer and he was suddenly aware of the crisp floral scent that was so her. He remembered how she smelled because she spent so much time hanging around him and Len, driving them crazy when they were younger, wanting to be part of whatever they did because Len was her “real” brother. Her full brother. And now he was gone.

“She wants me to wear the freaking dress that she paid too much for.” She lowered her voice for another stage whisper. “As if I asked for it. For the record, I did not. I wanted the five-hundred-dollar dress, but she liked the other one.” Emma leaned closer still and her long reddish-brown hair brushed over his arm like a whisper of silk. “She wants to impress the neighbors. Outdo Marilee’s wedding. Since I’m the only girl in the family, I’m the only shot she has.”

“Come on, Em. She isn’t going to encourage you to get married just so she can pour money down a wedding rathole.”

“Oh, yeah?” She sank into her chair. “Well, she can’t get her deposits back. The money is already poured.”

Jess gave his head a shake. “Not much anyone can do about that.”

Emma’s expression brightened. “Maybe you can take Darion’s place? Just for a while? Fake wedding? Keep Selma happy?”

“I’d rather take a bullet in the leg.”

Emma’s mouth drooped again. “I had a feeling you’d say something like that.”

“Nothing personal, Em.”

“Yeah.” She leaned back in her chair and started surveying the room, as if trying to pick out another husband prospect.

“Do you want a ride home?”

A look of horror crossed her face. “No.” She cleared her throat, trying to sound nonchalant as she said, “I’m no longer staying at home.”

“Then where?”

“Starlight.”

“The motel?”

“Howard lets me park my truck in his garage.”

Howard had been one of Em’s friends in high school, but probably wasn’t on her mother’s radar because he was kind of shy and retiring. “Mom knows I’m okay because she stops to see me at work, but I won’t tell her where I’m staying. I’m one step away from blocking her number, too.” She gave a small snort as she stared down at the table. “I’m surprised she hasn’t tailed me.”

Jess knew from growing up with Len just how intense Selma could get when she was on a mission.

“How do you know she hasn’t?”

“I watch my rearview mirror.”

“Things were that bad with Darion?” Bad enough to call off a wedding? Although he had to give her credit for calling it off six months before the big day instead of waiting for the last moment.

She let out a breath. “I don’t want to talk about it. Besides, I refuse to marry him just to get Selma to leave me alone.”

“But you’d fake marry me.”

Emma smiled. “Because it’s you. There’d be no complications.”

“Ain’t going to happen.” Besides, he wasn’t certain if anything went down with Emma without complications. Even getting engaged to one of the nicest guys he’d ever met hadn’t kept things from getting complicated. No one knew exactly what happened with Em and Darion, and it didn’t appear that Jess would be the exception to the rule. One minute they were on, the next the wedding was off.

Darion was now working up north in Kalispell, having left right after the engagement was broken, and it didn't appear that he was coming back anytime soon.

"How are you getting home tonight? To the Starlight, I mean."

Her shoulders sank a little. "Good question. It looks like Willa did leave with someone." Just as Jess had hoped to do. Well, that wouldn't be happening. Talia had her arm linked with a tall cowboy who seemed satisfied with the way his night was playing out.

"I'm going that way."

"You barely got here."

"I think it's time to leave. I'm taking off tomorrow, so maybe a decent night's sleep is in order."

"Yes," Emma said in a mock stern voice as she got to her feet. "One must get their eight hours a night. And eat three square meals a day. And brush their teeth two—"

Jess took hold of her arm and gently propelled her forward. "What do I owe you?" he asked Gus, who waved his hand.

"See you tomorrow morning. Bring back some big purses."

"That's the plan," Jess said. He glanced down at Emma, who looked as if the booze was hitting her harder now that she was standing. "Do you have everything?"

"Everything except for a husband."

"You're not getting one of those here." He put an arm around her, drawing her close to his side to keep her on her feet as they negotiated the crowd. Again, her light floral scent drifted to his nostrils, and Jess was surprised at how well he remembered it. Well, it was said that traumatic memories are often triggered by scents, and while his experiences with Emma didn't qualify as traumatic, they did qualify as annoying.

When they stepped out into the damp evening air, Emma gave a small shiver. Jess's instinct was to pull her even closer, but instead he eased back, putting a hand on each shoulder and steering her toward his truck. She was keeping her feet well, but he wasn't taking chances.

"So you're into purses?" she asked as she negotiated around a puddle.

"Rodeo purses."

"I have one of those. Lots of silver and fringe—"

"Prize money, Emma."

She clapped a hand over her mouth, then dropped it and said, "I wasn't thinking rodeo because, well, you haven't been competing much. That's embarrassing."

"For a girl who used to chase cans, I imagine it is."

Emma had been one hell of a barrel racer, because the word caution never appeared in her vocabulary. She'd stopped after Len had been killed in the rollover accident on the road leading to their ranch.

He felt her stiffen and figured her thoughts were following the same line as his. He opened the door and handed her up into the truck, thinking that he'd probably never touched Emma this much, ever.

She let out a breath and let her head fall sideways against the window when Jess got into the driver's seat. He headed for the Starlight—an older, yet immaculately kept motel on the edge of town—and slowed to pull into the lot when Emma jerked suddenly. An instant later she was practically on the floor.

"Drive on."

"What?"

"Don't. Pull. In." When he looked over at her, she was scrunched down so far that she was invisible from the outside. He scanned the parking lot, then saw what had Emma curling up into a ball. Her younger brother Wylie was parked at the far end of the lot. And if he wasn't mistaken, there was another Sullivan ranch truck parked next to him. Selma, no doubt.

"Take me to your place," Emma murmured.

Jess opened his mouth to say “No,” but the utter desperation in her voice made him shut it again. He abruptly put the truck into gear.

“Thank you.” She spoke so low he barely heard her.

“I think you can sit up now.”

She pushed herself upright and let her head fall back again, squeezing her eyes shut. “I don’t feel so well.”

Jess stepped on the gas. Ten minutes later they were at the field that he called home. After his twin moved out, Jess had never felt cramped in the small camp trailer he lived in while saving money. He was going to feel cramped tonight.

After parking near the trailer, he started around to the passenger side of the truck. That was when he realized—too late, of course—that he’d parked too close to the big puddle that had formed during yesterday’s long rain.

“Em—”

Down she went. He heard her scramble and curse, and by the time he got around the hood of the truck, she was getting back to her feet and wiping wet hands down the sides of her pants.

“This sucks.”

“Sorry.”

She frowned at him first and then at the puddle next to her, all but invisible in the darkness, since he hadn’t bothered to leave the porch light on.

“Where are we?”

“My place.”

She looked around the dark field where his trailer, the only man-made structure within a mile, was parked. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Come on.” He took hold of her elbow as they walked together toward the trailer, but Emma pulled free.

“I could have used you a few minutes ago. I’m fine now.”

“Whatever,” he muttered. He unlocked the door and opened it, then stepped back as Emma climbed the metal steps. He followed her into the trailer and snapped on the light before closing the door, thus trapping the two of them in too small of a place.

You can’t abandon Len’s little sister.

The truth was that he wouldn’t have abandoned her even if she wasn’t related to Len. That wasn’t the kind of guy he was. He’d watch out for Emma until she was in a proper condition to do battle with Selma, who wanted her to wear the dress.

How stupid was that?

Emma grimaced down at her wet jeans, then shook her head as if thrusting the matter out of her mind.

“What’s all that stuff?” she asked, pointing at the canvas duffels and plastic storage containers.

“That’s my life for the next month.”

“The rodeo. Right.” She lost interest and swayed just a little as she crossed the tiny room and sat on the seat under the window. “Can I sleep here?”

“Sleep in my bed.”

“Where will you sleep?”

She seemed only mildly interested in the answer as she once again slumped sideways.

“Tyler’s bunk.” The small built-in bed in the hallway leading to the tiny bedroom at the back of the trailer.

“I’m fine here...” Em’s voice started to trail off. She was fading fast. Jess crossed the room and pulled her up to her feet, ignoring her muttered protests.

“You’ll do better in the bedroom.” That way he could get up, make coffee, start his day, while she slept it off. He propelled her down the hall, opening the door just before his bedroom.

“Bathroom,” he said. He opened the bedroom door and pointed inside. “Your bed.” He turned her so that she was square with the bathroom. “Are you good?”

“The best,” she muttered before taking a stumbling step into the bathroom and closing the door in his face.

Jess shut his eyes, let out a breath.

Len would want him to do this.

Chapter Two

Emma woke with a start, pushed herself up on one elbow, then collapsed with a low groan as her brain let out a mighty protest.

Where was she?

Think.

She tried. Her brain was still playing games with her. She opened her eyes again, took in the clues. She was in a ruffled bed in a travel trailer—

A surge of relief washed over her. Jess. She was with Jess Hayward. She was safe from her mom. Safe from her mother’s friends.

But for how long?

It wasn’t like they could march her to the altar and make her marry Darion, who would have a few things to say on the matter if it came to that. But they could make her very, very miserable. Darion had cut and run after they’d canceled the wedding, and was currently hiding out in Kalispell, but Em didn’t have that option. She had a job at the local café. She had no qualms about quitting, but she also had only a small nest egg to support her if she moved elsewhere—which left her at the mercy of Selma, the control freak.

There was a loud thump from the other end of the trailer and a muttered curse.

Jess, who’d given up his bed for her.

Well, he owed her for the crappy way he’d treated her in the past.

Em pushed back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for her head to clear. Dear heavens, but she’d kill for orange juice.

Maybe Jess had orange juice.

She reached for her pants, which were in a heap on the floor, grimacing as she realized they were soaking wet. A memory started to crystallize...tripping, hitting the puddle next to the truck, going down...

Embarrassing.

She shook out the pants. There was no way she was pulling those clammy things up her legs, so she got out of bed and opened the closet. There, on a shelf, was a stack of neatly folded jeans. She’d been hoping for sweats, but jeans would do. Sitting back on the bed, she pulled on the Wranglers. Jess was lean, but the pants still hung low on her hips. She bent down to roll the cuffs and instantly wished she hadn’t as her head started pounding harder. Aspirin was also a necessity.

She looked around the bedroom for her purse and came up empty. Hoping against hope that she hadn’t left it at the Shamrock, she put on the sweater she’d worn the night before and then quietly opened the bedroom door and slipped into the bathroom.

Yes. Ibuprofen. An economy-sized bottle, such as one would expect to find in the medicine chest of a bull rider. Pain was part of the game. Her brother had ridden broncs and she knew about hurting. Em popped two pills, washed them down, then grimaced as she faced her reflection.

She put a hand up to her bed head and tried to push her long unruly hair into a less bent shape. After a couple of pats and pushes she gave up and pulled open the door. It wasn’t as if Jess hadn’t seen her at her worst.

Although...last night may have been her worst. She was a drinking lightweight. She blamed Jess and Len, who never let her go out with them. She’d never even been drunk until she hit twenty—only one year shy of legal age. As long as her brother and his friend were around, she was well managed.

Now, Jess's twin, Tyler...he was fun. But he was also a friend of Len's and made sure she didn't get into trouble. Life after high school hadn't been as much fun as it could have been.

The curse of being the only girl in a family of boys—although until her father had married Selma, she'd only been the youngest of two. After Len had died, she had only half brothers. Three of them. All younger and all firmly under Selma's thumb. She'd encouraged them to rebel by setting an example, but they remained firmly managed—something she refused to be.

She headed toward the kitchen, a journey of about eight feet, past the bare bunk that Jess must have slept in to the main part of the camp trailer, wondering why she felt so stupidly self-conscious. This was Jess, after all. Worst-case scenario, he'd treat her like she was still fifteen. Best case... She wasn't certain that there was a best case.

Jess stood at the counter staring down at the toaster. He was ridiculously good-looking. Dark-haired with sculpted cheekbones and striking eyes. Her friends had all been mystified as to why she wasn't all over him. She assured them that it was because she knew him. It was his attitude. As in, he had this attitude toward her. So...she'd had an attitude toward him.

Yet here they were.

He suddenly looked up, meeting her gaze. Oh, yeah. Those were some eyes. Her memory wasn't faulty.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," she echoed, wishing her voice wasn't so thick.

His eyes strayed down to her legs. "Are you wearing my jeans?"

"Maybe?" She automatically hitched up one side as she answered. "You weren't using them." She indicated the duffels with a jerk of her chin. "And it looks like you're packed for your rodeo trip, which leads me to believe you weren't taking them."

"Maybe I wanted something clean to wear when I got home. Besides, that's not the point, Em."

She leaned her elbows on the counter next to him. "What is the point, Jess?"

"The point is that you took my stuff without asking."

"And if I had wandered out in my underwear to ask permission...?" She gave him a how-would-that-have-gone-over look.

"You could have called from the bedroom."

"Oh, Jeh-ess...can I wear your pa-ants?" She raised her eyebrows in a mock innocent expression. "Like that?"

"Yeah. Like that."

This felt like old times, when Jess would go all follow-the-rules on her whenever she came up with a great idea, like going out to party with him and her brother, even though she was underage, and she would argue with him.

"You want me to take them off?"

"No." The word came out so rapidly that it was almost embarrassing. His loss.

"Then I guess I get to wear your jeans." She looked around the trailer. "You have a clothes dryer here?"

"Yeah. Right."

"They make those apartment-size things."

"I go to the Laundromat."

"Pity. Now I have to wear your jeans."

He didn't answer, making her think that he was simply making noise about the jeans. The toast popped and he set it on a plate, then put the plate on the table. Emma took the hint and sat down, even though she wasn't the least bit hungry.

"We're going to talk."

"We are?"

“I brought you to my home rather than leaving you to the mercies of your mom. I want some answers.”

She narrowed her eyes, ignoring the fact that it made her head hurt. “What kind of answers?”

He set a cup of coffee on the table next to the toast and then leaned back against the counter, folding his arms over his chest. His expression was don't-mess-with-me serious when he said, “Tell me what's going on.”

“You want to know my business?”

“Yeah. I do.”

Em studied the table, debating. Other than Darion, no one knew the whole truth. She figured by this time, the conjecture was worse than what had actually happened, and far be it from her to disappoint the local gossips. She looked up at him. He had his stern brother look on. Somehow it didn't seem as effective without Len there to back him up.

“Fine. What do you want to know?”

“Why are you really hiding from Selma?”

Emma planted her elbows on the table and pressed her fingertips to her forehead. Jess knew her family. Knew the dynamics. If he didn't, he wouldn't have done the good-guy thing and taken her to his place instead of dropping her off at the motel where Selma would have had a fine old time making a scene. Em owed him.

“She wants me to marry Darion. She assumes Darion feels the same way.”

“He doesn't?”

“No. We broke up by mutual agreement.”

“Tell her that.” Em leveled a look at him and he cleared his throat. “Right.”

“She honestly believes that if she strong-arms us into matrimony it'll all work out. She thinks I have the jitters.”

“But you don't.”

She gave her head a slow shake, because a fast one would have hurt. He looked like he wanted more information, but she'd gotten as personal as she was going to get. “She won't let it rest. I thought moving into the motel would make my point.”

“How much are you paying to stay there?”

“Nothing. I helped Howie get through all his math classes from kindergarten on. He's kind of indebted to me.”

“His folks know?”

“I think they think we should get married—Howie and I, I mean.” She let her head fall back, closing her eyes. “I need to escape.”

“Running doesn't work.”

She opened her eyes. “How do you know? Have you ever run from anything?”

“Is this working for you?”

“I haven't run far enough. I can't afford to run far enough.”

“Is there such a thing as far enough when Selma is involved?”

“Maybe not.” She let out a breath and then took a small nibble on the edge of the toast. Her stomach told her to stop, and she did, setting the toast back on the plate. As to the coffee...she swallowed hard. She truly was a drinking lightweight. “Do you have orange juice?”

“No. I'm taking off later today, so I emptied the fridge. That's why there's no butter on your toast.” One corner of his mouth tightened. “You know...if you needed a place to stay, you could stay here.”

Emma stared at him. Selma would find her...but maybe not for a couple of days.

And surely she'd give up when Emma started paying her back for the wedding dress she hadn't wanted, which had been a special order and couldn't be returned.

“You know...I think Selma was trying to make sure I didn’t back out of the ceremony by buying me that dress.”

“What?”

Jess never had been that good at following her thought processes...but neither had anyone else. Her mind did tend to jump around. Even Len had problems and he was the person closest to her. She smiled at Jess—maybe her first smile in days. “I appreciate the offer.”

“I’ll be gone for the better part of the summer.”

“Hitting the circuit?” She remembered the rodeo purse.

“Hitting it hard. I have to decide whether to go pro this January. Time is running out for me.”

“I see.” She studied the table in front of her, wondering what her next move would be now that Selma had ferreted her out at the Starlight and had brought Wylie along for backup. She’d eventually find her here. Her life would be hell for the next few weeks. Darion would be no help, because Selma thought he also had cold feet and would be as hard on him as she was on Emma if he was foolish enough to come back to Gavin.

Neither of them had the jitters—they had each chosen the wrong person and were doing something about it before it was too late. Selma didn’t see it that way, which made Emma wonder about her marriage to her father.

Had they settled? If so, they seemed happy, which only gave Selma ammunition.

If only Darion had cheated on her...or done something outrageous. Then maybe Selma would back off.

“Em...?”

She raised her gaze, met the eyes of the man that she trusted most in this world—even if he did piss her off most of the time. He was the closest thing she had to her brother and right now she needed her brother.

“Take me with you.” The words came out before the thought was formed.

The look on his face was priceless. It also ticked her off. “I’m not kidding.”

“You can’t come with me.”

“Why?”

“For all the reasons I’ve given over the years when you wanted to come along with me and Len.”

“I’m not underage anymore.” She was twenty-five, but he probably didn’t realize that. He started to speak, but she interrupted. “I can drive part-time, which will come in handy if you get yourself all beat up, which is a very real possibility.” He opened his mouth again, and again she jumped in. “I have a little money socked away. Not enough to start a new life, as I’d hoped, but enough to buy food for myself for four weeks.”

Jess eyed her, obviously waiting for her to run out of steam before telling her no way.

“You can buy the gas, because you’d be doing that no matter what.”

Jess waited a few more seconds, then said, “Are you done.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“Waiting to hear all the reasons that this is a no-go,” she said mildly. “Although, you know that Len would have taken me.”

“How do I know that?”

Her tone became low and serious. “Because this isn’t a matter of me being capricious. This is something I need to do. Selma is breaking me, Jess. I don’t want to run forever...just until I can get my equilibrium back.”

He was wavering. He, who took the hard line whenever she’d come up with some scheme to include herself in his and Len’s adventures.

“I lost my brother a little over a year ago, Jess.” Nineteen months, actually. “I’m not one hundred percent. And I think Len’s death is affecting Selma, too. I just...want to get away.”

He lowered his eyes. Tapped his fingers on the table a couple of times. Em held her breath. Waited. “What about your job?”

“There’s a stack of applications in the office. Skye will understand.” Jess’s sister-in-law was now managing the café where she worked. She was a friend. “Don’t make me beg.”

He met her gaze with a frown. “You are begging.”

“Don’t make me beg super hard, then.”

Jess scrubbed his hands over his face, and Emma let out a silent sigh of relief. She’d won. She was going to get her reprieve. “Only if Skye will hold your job for you.”

“What?”

“You have to make a living when you come back.”

“That’s not your concern.”

“But it’s my condition...that and a rodeo-by-rodeo assessment. If this isn’t working, then the deal is done.”

Emma wished her head wasn’t hurting so much. Yes, that seemed fair enough...except for the rodeo-by-rodeo thing. She did have a way of triggering Jess.

Well, she’d just have to figure out a way not to do that.

* * *

JESS THOUGHT BACK over his rides at Hennessey’s practice pens the day before. He hadn’t hit his head, so he couldn’t blame anything but himself for agreeing to let Emma ride along with him on his rodeo tour.

The change in her expression when she’d realized he was about to say yes had been profound and drove home the point that Emma, who had the ability to bounce back from any and all situations, was not bouncing back from the death of her brother and her broken engagement. Throw in a controlling stepmom and...well, he’d said yes.

He hoped he didn’t regret it.

Of course you’re going to regret it.

Okay—he hoped he wasn’t going to regret it too much.

“I need to go to the motel and get my stuff.”

“Do you have enough to travel?”

“I’d better, because I’m not going back to the ranch to pick up more.”

“But you will tell them you’re leaving.”

“The beauty of texting.”

“And talk to Skye.”

“I’ll do that today before we leave.”

“Are you leaving her in a lurch?”

“No. It just occurred to me that Chelsea wanted to ease back into part-time now that she’s had the baby, so this will work out well.” She shrugged. “It’s almost like it’s meant to be.”

He didn’t know about that, but he was certain that now that he’d said yes, there was no way he could say no—at least not until they started wrangling with one another while on the road.

“I’m driving to Union City tonight.”

She gave him a small smile. “We can pick my stuff up on the way out of town.”

[Chapter Three](#)

Jess didn’t have a lot to say when he drove, so Emma read on her phone and left him in peace. Len had always wanted to get into his head before an event, and she figured Jess was the same. And even though she was being the perfect cab-mate, riding in silence, Jess kept cutting looks her way as if expecting her to speak.

What was she supposed to say? Thank you for taking me with you? She’d already said that, and Em wasn’t a big believer in repeating herself.

On the fifteenth or sixteenth look she finally broke.

“Nice day for a drive.”

He frowned at her.

“You wanted me to talk, right?”

“I was wondering why you weren’t talking.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

He gave her an I’m-not-falling-for-that look. Fine. He didn’t have to fall for anything. She went back to her phone. He wasn’t going to be able to complain that she was distracting him from mentally preparing for his ride.

“When did you become so quiet?”

“When I figured out that listening was as valuable as talking.” She scrolled to the next page.

“When did that happen?”

She gave a small shrug. “Years ago.”

“Not that many years ago.”

She couldn’t help scowling at him. “I was in college.” She’d dropped out shortly after Len died. “Ah.”

That shut him up. Good. She wanted to read...except now she couldn’t focus. She turned off her phone, set it in the door compartment next to her. Union City wasn’t that far away and once they got there, they’d set up camp. Jess had a camper on the back of his truck that he’d borrowed from Gus. Since Em was short, and grateful to be along for the ride, she’d volunteered to sleep in the truck, thus giving him privacy.

They pulled into the Union City rodeo grounds a little after seven. Jess leveled the camper while Em rolled out her sleeping bag in the rear seat of the truck. Once the bag was in place she walked back to the camper and knocked on the frame of the open door. Jess was already testing out the stove. They’d agreed to take turns cooking on the road and tonight it was his turn.

In Emma’s mind, he was lucky to have her along. He didn’t have to partner up with anyone to share the driving and he was assured of a decent meal after competition. If he ended up in the hospital, he had someone there to watch his back. Though, honestly, after losing Len, the idea of anyone being in the hospital kind of froze her up.

Emma shoved the thought aside and stepped up into the cramped confines of the camper. Jess continued fiddling with the cooktop, so she stepped to the opposite side and scooted behind the built-in table, the upholstery on the bench catching her jeans and making it hard to slide properly. She propped her elbows on the table as Jess lit a match to test a burner—something she was certain he’d done before they’d left, because he was that kind of guy. He’d no doubt changed the oil on the truck and had the tires rotated, too.

“A little cozier than your last place.”

“The price was right.” After the burner caught, he leaned back, turning the knob to adjust the flame from high to low before turning it back off again. “Gus Hawkins used it when he was on the circuit.”

“Before he came to his senses and started tending bar?”

He gave her a sour look that made her want to smile, but since she was taking pains to steer them away from their old roles—Jess, the rule guy, versus Emma, the rule breaker—she settled for a mere twitch of the lips. Although she’d noticed on more than one occasion that Jess wasn’t so much about him following the rules, as he was about Emma following the rules.

Whatever.

“Since the stove is working, can we make some coffee?”

He sent her a look. “And stay up all night?”

“Coffee doesn’t affect me that way.”

“Then I’ll make you some coffee.”

“Going to have trouble sleeping?”

“Not if I don’t have coffee.”

“You don’t have to make coffee for me. I can do it.”

She started to slide out from behind the table, but he shook his head. “Stay put.”

Emma shrugged and scooted back, where she leaned against the upholstered foam cushion behind her. Darion would have stepped back and happily allowed her to make coffee. Darion probably wouldn’t have minded being in that tight space with her. Jess, on the other hand, had never liked being too close to her—little sister cooties or something.

She let out a low sigh. Why couldn’t things have been...better...with Darion?

“You okay?” Jess frowned as he filled the small coffeepot. He must have heard her sigh. Well, there were sighs and then there were sighs. This was a sigh of frustration, not a sigh of unhappiness, but she saw no sense in trying to explain that to him.

“I’m fine.” She spoke lightly. “Just going over some things in my head.” He scooped coffee into the basket, then set the pot on the burner. “What’s the schedule tomorrow?” she asked.

“I ride. We leave.”

“That’s what I thought.” So much for making conversation, but as awkward as this felt, it was nine hundred times better than dodging her mother and brothers. Not that her brothers were that much of a problem, but they were being nagged by Selma, too. And things would start to feel less uncomfortable between her and Jess as they put more miles behind them.

She tapped the tips of her fingers together as she tried to remember a time that things had been good between them. Couldn’t come up with one, which made her wonder why she trusted him so implicitly.

Maybe because he was the one guy she’d never been able to pull one over on?

Or maybe because he was such a Dudley Do-Right, as opposed to his twin, Tyler, who looked for and found trouble on an almost daily basis?

Did it matter?

Silence hung until the coffee started perking and Jess filled a ceramic mug up to the brim.

“Thanks.” She wasn’t about to ask for cream, but she’d be buying some tomorrow.

He nodded, then seemed to be at a loss as to where to perch himself in the confines of the camper.

“Do you want me to take my coffee to the truck and drink it there?”

“Why?”

“You look uncomfortable.”

“I’m not uncomfortable. Just...cramped.”

“If I went to the truck—”

He let out a pained breath, which seemed to be his favored way of communicating with her, and then sat down on the short L of the bench around the table so that they were perpendicular to one another. She smiled at him over the top of the coffee cup.

“You make a decent cup of joe.”

“Thanks.”

She sipped, reminding herself again not to do what came naturally and trigger him. She owed him for this opportunity to escape, and since he’d said they would evaluate the situation rodeo by rodeo, she didn’t want to screw things up too early.

“I brought cards,” she said. “I assume that strip poker is out, but maybe cribbage?”

“Did you bring a board?”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. Selma was an amazing cribbage player—something to do with her utterly controlling personality, no doubt—and she’d taught all of her children to play and play well. There had been no allowing the kids to win in order to build their confidence in the Sullivan house. Definitely a dog-eat-dog card-playing world that Jess had been introduced to when he’d become Len’s friend.

“Stupid question,” he muttered.

She reached for her giant Western purse with the silver and the fringe and the bling and pulled out a folding cribbage board made of bird’s-eye maple. Jess reached out to run a finger over it.

“Len made it for me.”

“I remember.” A shadow crossed his features, but Emma pretended not to notice. Grief had been her partner for too long and, while she acknowledged it, she no longer let it take over her life—for the most part, that is. There were always weak moments, but she wasn’t going to let this be one of them.

She pulled the cards out of her purse, shuffled once and set the cards between them. Jess cut a deuce, she cut an ace and picked up the deck. “I think we should play for money.”

“You don’t have any money.”

“Exactly. I need some.” She picked up her cards, quickly choosing two for her crib. Jess debated, chose his cards, then cut the deck. She turned up a jack and pegged two points. “A dollar a point?”

“No.” He played his first card and Emma paired it, pegging two more points. And so it went. They played two games, with Emma continuing to have crazy luck. After pegging her last point and skunking him, she drained the last of her coffee.

“This is good,” she said as she gathered the cards and put them back in the box. “You used up all your bad luck tonight, so you’ll have a good ride tomorrow.”

He didn’t look convinced.

Emma reached out to lightly pat his face, as she would have done with Darion or one of her brothers, only realizing as her palm made contact that this was Jess, not Darion or one of her brothers. Dear heavens. What was she doing?

And why was her stomach free-falling at the feel of rough stubble beneath her hand?

This was embarrassing.

She forced a smile and casually dropped her hand before reaching for her coffee cup. It was halfway to her lips before she realized that it was empty.

Did she fake a drink or get a grip?

She chose to get a grip and set down the cup. She’d touched Jess’s face. Big deal. He’d been like a brother to her for years.

And that was probably why he was scowling at her so deeply right now.

“Sorry,” she said. “I do that to my brothers.”

“No worries,” he said gruffly, but she’d felt him go still beneath her touch, knew that it had startled him as much as it had startled her. “I need to turn in early tonight.”

“Yeah. I know.” She slid out from the bench. “I want to catch a shower anyway over at the public facilities.” It’d been a while since she’d traveled the circuit, and she’d never traveled it as intensely as Jess planned to travel this one, but she knew the drill. On the nights you weren’t celebrating or driving, you got to bed early. A worn-out body wasn’t capable of peak performance, and with the schedule Jess had ahead of him, he needed to get all the rest he could while he could.

“What time will it be safe?” He frowned at her instead of asking her what she meant. “At what time can I enter the camper and find you decent?”

“Seven?”

“Seven is good. And if you can have the coffee on, that will be even better.”

* * *

PLAY FOR MONEY. Right. If he and Emma played for money, she’d have to buy the gas instead of him. She was a good player, but she also had the most ridiculous luck. Nobody pulled the fourth jack on the turn up. But Emma did. Len had been good, but Emma was a natural with numbers. She’d gone to college with the hope of becoming an engineer, but had quit after the funeral, settling at home and choosing to work a variety of part-time jobs.

Jess hadn't really kept up with her, but he'd seen her around town, working in various capacities. Funny how Selma was nuts about her getting married, but hadn't hounded her about finishing her education. Maybe because she knew, as Jess did, that Emma would finish it when she was ready.

He rolled over in the bunk. Maybe Selma had wanted Emma to get married because it would help ground her while she mourned. It was a dumb idea, but Selma was also mourning, and people didn't always think straight during rough times.

A good example was him agreeing to let Emma travel with him.

For a while anyway. He didn't see her lasting for all four weeks of his tour, but if it helped her to get away for a while, then he was game.

The next morning he was up early—well before seven—so when Emma knocked, he'd already showered and the coffee was on. He never ate breakfast on the days that he rode, and he rarely ate lunch, unlike his brother, who was counting protein calories and doing yoga. He settled into his head and waited for his ride, going over it, anticipating every move the animal could make, so that his reaction would be automatic. So far it had worked. He had a decent record, but if there was one certainty in bull riding, it was that there was no certainty.

The same rule kind of applied to Emma.

"You have coffee, right?" She was on the pot in a heartbeat, making Jess glad that he'd left her a cup instead of waiting until she got there to make more. He might have to buy a bigger percolator.

She brought the cup to her lips, her eyes closing as she first inhaled and then drank. "Sweet manna of life."

"I didn't know you were a coffee freak."

She slid into her spot behind the table, resting her elbows on the surface and cupping the mug with both hands. "There's a lot you don't know about me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she said, her full lips tilting up on one side. She really did have an amazing mouth. "Telling me to scram didn't make you privy to my many secrets."

He thought about it and had to agree. He didn't know that much about her. Not the things that she held close anyway.

"What do I need to know?"

Her lips started to twitch in a way he didn't like, as if she'd just heard a great joke but didn't want to let him in on the punch line. "What?"

"That jerk Benny Two Feathers just asked me all snide-like if we were shacking up and I told him we were on our honeymoon. That shut him up."

"Good one, Em." He let out a breath. It didn't matter. It really didn't. And knowing Benny, he fully understood why she'd done that. The guy was a jerk.

He just hoped word didn't get back to Selma. The last thing he needed was for her to set her sights on him as Emma's future husband.

Chapter Four

"You married Emma Sullivan?"

Jess stopped stretching and turned toward Benny Two Feathers, who was smirking at him, as if being married to Em was a bad thing. "We're not married."

"Maybe you should tell Emma that."

"She was yanking your chain," Jess said tightly, settling his hands at the belt of his fringed chaps. "Possibly because you were out of line."

"Hey. I was just curious."

"Yeah. Well, to satisfy your curiosity, Emma is traveling with me to help with the driving." Benny's smirk became more pronounced and Jess had to work to keep his fingers from tightening on his belt. It didn't matter what Benny thought, even if he did have the biggest mouth around. "Em's brother died not all that long ago and she just called off her wedding. She wanted some time away

to get her head together. I offered to let her ride along.” Kind of. “She doesn’t need you spreading rumors about us on top of everything else.”

“I, uh—”

“She’s my dead best friend’s little sister.” Jess took a step closer to Benny. “And you’d better leave her alone.”

Benny put his chest up, but he didn’t have a lot of fight in his eyes as he said, “I meant no harm.”

“Doesn’t matter what you meant.”

Benny gave a curt nod and took a step back. “I’ll, uh, tell her I’m sorry next time I see her.”

“She’d probably appreciate that.”

Jess went back to his stretching, ignoring Benny as he drifted away. One rumor squelched. And since Benny was a talker, everyone would soon know that Em had called off her wedding and that they weren’t married. The latter was the more important of the two.

“You’re married?”

Jess looked up to see Lara Wynam standing a few yards behind him, her big sorrel barrel horse standing at her shoulder. “I’m not married.”

She shot a frowning look toward the field where the competitors parked, then back at him. “That guy.”

“Benny?”

“Yes. He told me you and Emma were on your honeymoon.”

“He was messing with you.”

She drew in a breath. “I have to admit to being surprised to hear you were married. I’ve never seen you out with Emma.”

“She just called off her real wedding. She’s traveling with me to get away for a while.” Jess wondered how many times he was going to have to retell the story. “The canceled wedding, Len’s death...get the picture?”

“Oh. Poor kid.”

“Yeah. She’s pretty broken up. I needed a driver and this worked out for both of us.”

Lara’s smile brightened and she pushed her shiny dark hair over her shoulder. “Sorry to have jumped you like that. I was...surprised. And I guess it makes sense, since she’s Len’s little sister.”

He and Lara had dated for a while, and he could see where it would be surprising to hear that he was suddenly married. “If you hear anyone asking about my marriage, would you mind setting them straight?”

“I’d be happy to.” She smiled again, the dimple that had once so fascinated him showing beneath the corner of her mouth. “Good luck today.”

“You, too, WW.”

She cocked an eyebrow at the use of her nickname, then turned and led her horse toward the practice arena. Jess watched the sway of fringe across the back of her shirt as she left. Good-looking woman. Center of her own world. They’d parted friends—or as close to being friends as Lara was capable of.

Enough distraction.

He was stretched out; his rope was prepped. The last section of barrel racers was about to begin and after that the bulls would be loaded.

He paced around the perimeter of the chutes, nodding at his competition, but not talking. He’d never been a talker before a ride. Tyler would launch into a long story, excuse himself for his ride, then come back and finish the tale if the guy was still around to listen. Jess had always been the quiet twin.

The cautious twin.

Until he was in the chute, on board the animal. Then he was all about winning.

The last barrel racer did her thing. The time was announced and then the equipment team drove into the arena to remove the barrels before the tractor gave the ground one last go-over. The chutes

banged and clanged as the crew loaded the bulls. He'd drawn Lil Bill, which could be good or bad, depending on how Bill felt that day. When Bill bucked, he was dynamite. When he didn't, it stunk because he bucked just enough to keep the rider from getting a re-ride. Jess hoped Lil Bill wasn't having one of his lazy days.

Jess headed to the chute once Bill was loaded, finagled the bull rope into position. Bill stood quietly, which made Jess wonder what kind of ride he was going to have. Bill remained quiet as the bull two chutes down exploded out of the pen when the gate opened, giving Tim LeClair one heck of a ride.

"Watch and learn," Jess muttered to the black-and-white bull when the whistle blew. He eased on top of his mount and double-checked his grip after Chase Wells, a fellow bull rider, pulled his rope tight for him. If this first ride didn't put him in the money, there were other rodeos...but he had every intention of getting to the finals, so he needed this one to be decent. To set the stage, give him momentum.

The gate swung open. Bill set his butt against the back of the chute and refused to move. The gate closed again.

Jess adjusted himself, waited for the gate to open again. When it did, Bill humped up, hesitated, then suddenly reared, blasting out of the chute, exactly as he was supposed to have done the first time.

Despite all signs to the contrary, Bill was in a bucking mood.

When the whistle blew, Jess was close to the fence, where Bill seemed intent on wiping him off now that his job was over. He leaped off the bull, hit the ground, then felt hooves come down on either side of him. He ducked, then as soon as the thundering stopped, dashed for the fence.

Bill made a hook at one of the bullfighters, shook his head at the guy, then with a snort and a flick of his tail, allowed the safety man to guide him to the exit gate.

Jess popped the chin strap of his helmet and headed back across the arena, barely hearing the applause. It'd been a good ride. He didn't know if it would score better than LeClair's, but, in his mind, it should. Lil Bill had gone beyond the call of duty.

* * *

EMMA PUSHED OFF from the fence near the chutes where she'd squeezed between two guys to watch Jess's ride. It was impossible to watch a bull ride without feeling a degree of concern, and her heart had been hammering. But now Jess was back on the ground, in one piece, and she could focus on the here and now.

They had a ten-hour drive to the next rodeo tomorrow evening in Brisby, Montana. Emma had no idea if Jess wanted to travel halfway tonight or whether he wanted to leave early the next morning. She'd meant to get a clear answer on that before the ride, but Jess had disappeared before she could ask. Just in case, she'd packed her gear and had it ready to go. It'd be easy to roll her sleeping bag back out on the back seat if he wanted to take off in the morning.

Before she started back to the truck, Jess came out from behind the chutes and stopped to talk to another bull rider, whom she didn't know. It'd been a while since she'd been on the circuit and there were a lot of new faces along with the familiar ones. One face stood out, though, in addition to Benny Two Feathers... Lara Wynam, whose trailer was parked a few spaces away from Jess's truck.

Winning Wynam.

Emma gave a small snort as she headed back to the truck. Or Whining Wynam. If Lara didn't win, then Lara had an excuse. The arena wasn't properly raked, the gate man sucked, she had her suspicions about the electric timer, yada, yada. Emma didn't bide excuses. There'd been none in her house while she was growing up, and she wasn't putting up with bogus defenses from other people. Guess what, Lara? Sometimes you don't win. Every now and again, someone might be better.

Her mouth tightened as she passed the woman's trailer and recalled the fact that Lara always donated heavily to junior rodeo. Okay, she wasn't all bad. Just...privileged. And she complained a lot.

Maybe it was growing up the way Em had, in a blended family with a stern, not necessarily fair, but always controlling, matriarch at the helm that gave her little patience for people who assumed that life was supposed to go their way. That wasn't how it worked. She was living proof.

She'd barely reached the truck when Jess showed up, his chaps slung over his shoulder, his bull rope in one hand.

"Didn't win?" The winners were being announced as they spoke.

"Second."

Emma pushed back her hair, holding it against the wind. "LeClair?"

"Yeah." He seemed good with the decision. Emma was not.

"That's bogus. I saw both rides."

Jess's mouth twitched. "The judges saw it differently. By a point."

"At least you're in the money."

"That I am. Ready to leave?"

"I am if you are."

"I thought I'd clean up, if you don't mind grabbing us some burgers for the road."

"Sure."

"And Em?" She shot him a look over her shoulder. "Try to do it without telling anyone we're married, okay?"

She waved her hand at him. "No promises."

The corner of his mouth twitched again and then he started back toward the camper. Emma skirted a few trailers and then had the good fortune to see Benny Two Feathers talking to another rider next to his trailer.

He gave her a look as she went by and half a step later she stopped and reversed course. "Jess and I aren't married."

"I know."

"And we're not shackled up either."

He frowned down at her. "You could have just told me that."

"And you could have kept your creepy questions to yourself."

The guy next to him turned a choked laugh into a cough. Benny gave him a quick narrow-eyed look and the guy simply put his hands up in mock surrender. Benny was a big guy and not that many people messed with him. Emma was one of the few who did.

"I've always treated you with respect, Benny. I expect the same right back." She gave him a nod and continued toward the concession stand, which looked like it was about to close. Behind her she heard Benny mutter a colorful remark that wasn't all that complimentary, but she understood his need to save face. She was good with that, as long as he stayed out of her business in the future.

And hey...she hadn't thought about Selma or Darion in almost an hour.

* * *

WHEN JESS GOT back to the truck from the fairground shower facility, which was a whole lot roomier than the facility available in the camper, Emma had a bag of burgers, fries and two giant drinks waiting in the truck. The engine was running and she was behind the wheel. She tilted her aviator sunglasses down as he got into the passenger seat.

"Where are we stopping for the night?"

"Depends on how far you feel like driving."

She gave him a considering look, then put the truck in gear without answering. The field was now close to empty, with only a handful of trucks and trailers remaining. When they reached Brisby the next day, they'd be parking close to a lot of the same people. That was the thing about rodeo—it was like a big traveling family. And like all families, there were members you could depend on and those you avoided.

“So far, so good, wouldn’t you say?” Em pulled onto the freeway and eased in behind a truck and Jess made a conscious effort to relax his tense muscles. He’d never ridden with Em before and had no idea whether she was a decent driver or not. As she’d said, so far, so good. She glanced over at him, waiting for a response to her chit-chatty question.

“Would have been better if I’d walked away with the big money, but all in all not bad.” He shifted the leg that Bill had squeezed against the chute. “I could have done without explaining that I wasn’t married.” Emma only shrugged, again without looking at him. “Spread any more rumors about us before we pulled out?” She gave him a curious sidelong glance and he explained, “Just trying to ascertain what I might be up against next stop.”

“No rumors. But I did tell Benny to back off.”

So had he. Between the two of them, the guy should have gotten the message.

“Maybe you shouldn’t mess with Benny.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t mess with me.”

Jess smiled in spite of himself, then worked his way into a more comfortable position, propping a knee against the dashboard and folding his arms over his middle before closing his eyes. If he could get an hour of sleep, he could take over the driving.

* * *

JESS FELL ASLEEP almost instantly, which was something considering the fact that he’d been practically white-knuckled when she’d pulled onto the freeway. To him, she was still Len’s little sister, competent enough to help them rope and brand calves, but not ready for prime time in other arenas of life. Fine. It was a role she was comfortable with, the bothersome little sister, and more than that, Jess was comfortable with it.

He was not comfortable with them being pretend-married.

She gave a small snort as she recalled Benny’s face when she’d first told him, then glanced over to see if she’d disturbed Jess. He was out, dark eyelashes fanned over the tanned skin above his cheekbones. Her heart bumped a little. He really was good-looking. Maybe it was because she hadn’t been around him in well over a year that he seemed different. Or maybe she was looking at him differently. Whatever. She could kind of see what her friends saw—now that he was asleep and not telling her what she couldn’t do.

The road straightened out in front of her and traffic was light, so she chanced another glance, curious about why he seemed different. Maybe it was the fact that he’d matured and the angles of his face had become more chiseled, the hollows under his cheekbones more pronounced.

She eased her way around the only car in front of them for miles and then glanced back at Jess. His mouth, which she had to admit was a very fine mouth, was slightly open—and, a split second later, so were his eyes.

Em gave a start as her gaze slammed into his electric one.

“The road.” The words were clipped. Not very friendly.

She jerked her attention to the pavement—where’d it’d been one short second before she’d given in to temptation and went for that third look.

“I was just checking on you,” she said in a huffy voice.

“To see if I was breathing?”

“To see why you looked different.”

He frowned at her. “Different how?”

She kept both hands on the wheel, squeezing it more tightly than she needed to. “I don’t know. That was why I was looking.”

He sat up straighter.

“You can sleep, you know. It wasn’t as if I was staring dreamily at you rather than minding the road. You just happened to catch me midglance.”

“Ah.”

“And they were fast glances.” She demonstrated, exaggerating the speed of her head turns.
“Like that.”

“Stop.”

She smiled a little and relaxed now that they were safely back in their roles, although she couldn't say why the word safe had popped into her brain. “I think it's because you've lost weight.”

She sensed that he'd gone still and risked his wrath by glancing over at him yet again. He wore a perplexed expression. “I don't recall ever being particularly heavy.”

“In your face. You've lost the baby fat.”

He muttered something that sounded like a plea to a higher power, then slumped back into his seat. “I don't know if I can sleep if you're looking at me.”

“I won't look. Promise.”

He let out a breath. Em fought with herself, then glanced over. His eyes were still open.

“That was a trap,” she said as she focused on the road.

“That was a test.”

“I guess you're going to have to get used to me staring at you when you sleep if you're going to take advantage of having another driver along.”

He let out a long breath and closed his eyes once again—Em knew because she looked. “Just...keep it between the lines, okay?”

“I will,” she said in a resigned voice. “And maybe, for once, you can have some faith in me.”

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