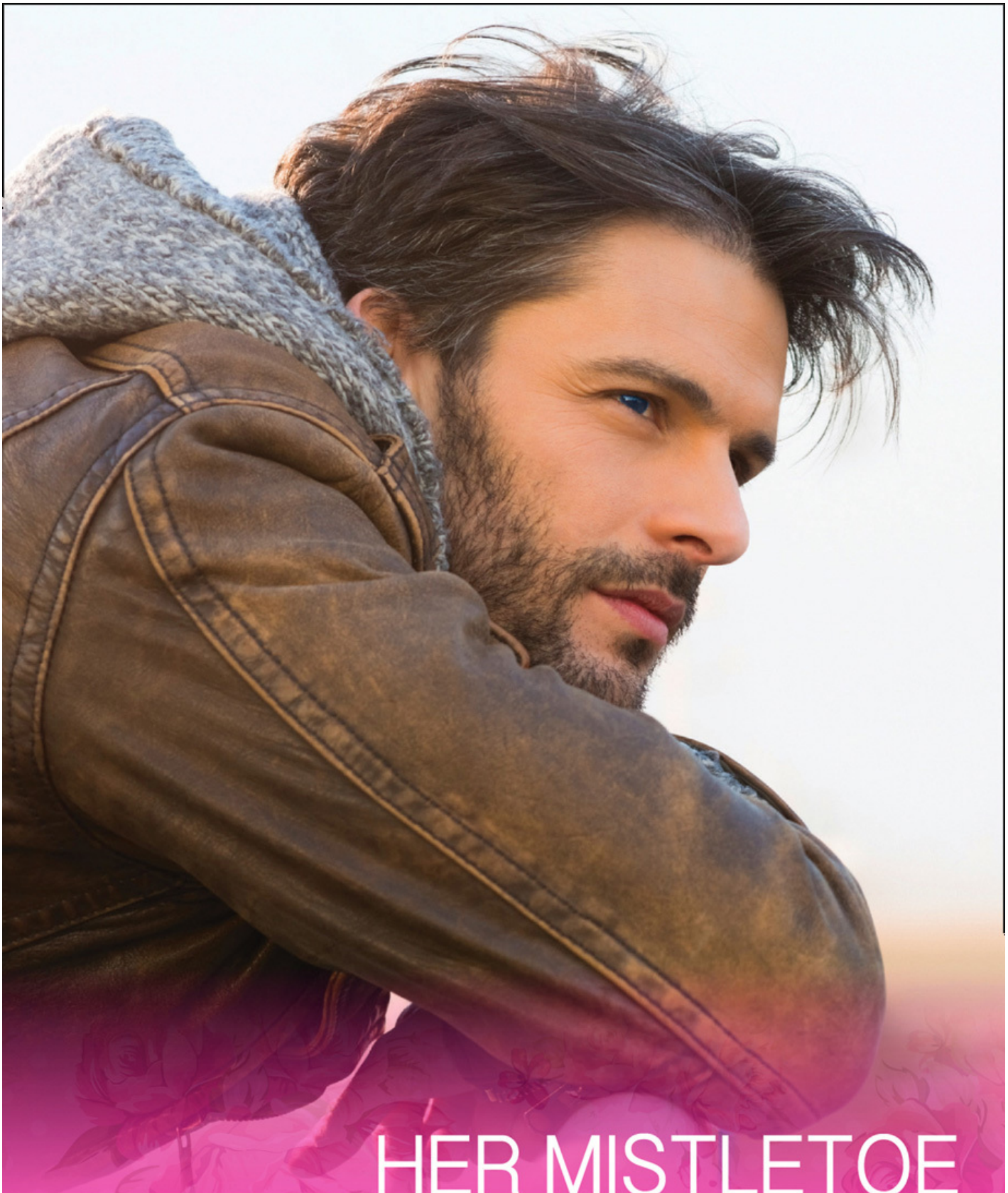

HER MISTLETOE COWBOY

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Second Chance Ranch with First-rate CowboyKimberly Lee isn't sure what she'll find when she comes to Forever, Texas, to do a story on a groundbreaking program that could put this small town on the map. It certainly isn't the warm, friendly community that makes the roving reporter feel instantly at home. Or the accident that lays her up at Garrett White Eagle's ranch, where the blue-eyed rancher awakens feelings she long ago gave up.Giving people hope again is the goal of the healing ranch Garrett started with his brother. And the lovely, hard-working writer is no exception. Doesn't Kim realize how much good they can do—together? Her future is here with him. If she's willing to trust in a love that could fulfill the promise of forever.

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Содержание

Praise for Marie Ferrarella 6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 27

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Cowboy

Marie Ferrarella

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To Father Anthony

of

St. Joseph's Indian School

Thank you for all you've done

and

keep up the good work!

Contents

Cover
Praise for Marie Ferrarella
Title Page
About the Author
Dedication
Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five

Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Epilogue
Extract
Copyright
Prologue

"No."

Stunned, Garrett White Eagle stared at his older brother, Jackson. He'd just checked his email and when he read the notification from the editor in chief of a well-known magazine, asking to do an in-depth article on the work he and his brother were doing at the Healing Ranch, he thought that Jackson would be as excited about it as he was.

Obviously not.

This was going to take some work on his part, Garrett decided.

"No?" he repeated incredulously. "What do you mean, no?"

Jackson rose from behind the scarred, second-hand desk he'd rescued from being turned into kindling half a dozen years ago. He had a full day ahead of him at the ranch and he'd already wasted enough time with the stack of unpaid bills that seemed to be breeding on his desk. Apparently, moving them from one pile to another didn't diminish their number or get them paid off any sooner.

He couldn't think about them right now. The boys were waiting for him at the corral. The bunkhouse was almost filled to capacity and every teen currently staying at the ranch required individual care. He'd sworn when he took all this on that nothing short of that would suffice and he had meant it. But it did get hard to live up to at times.

"No," Jackson repeated. "It's a simple enough word to grasp." The corners of his mouth curved just the slightest bit as he glanced toward his younger brother. "Even you, with your limited education, should be able to figure out its meaning."

"Look, I get it. You're not into social media. But I'm not asking you to get on Twitter, or Facebook, or any of the other modern innovations you keep insisting on staying clear of. I'm not even asking you to use smoke signals, like our ancestors. But to turn your back on a magazine interview is positively criminal," Garrett accused. "*Western Times* is a *big-time magazine*," he emphasized, as if the increased volume would somehow get his brother to agree. This was an opportunity and he wasn't about to give up until he made Jackson see the light. He had his work cut out for him, seeing as Jackson could bring new meaning to the word *stubborn* when he wanted to.

Jackson turned around for a split second, looking his brother in the eye and enunciating every word slowly. "I can't make time for it."

"Do you have time to make money?" Garrett asked. "How about that? Do you have time to do that?"

Jackson stifled an impatient sigh. "What are you talking about? They're not paying us for the interview."

"No, but doing the interview could really pay off in the long run." Garrett picked up his pace to keep up with Jackson.

Just like when we were younger, he couldn't help remembering. Back then, he'd worshipped Jackson, who was five years his senior. Technically, Jackson was his half brother. They shared a father who wasn't interested in either of them. Ben White Eagle walked out on them just the way Jackson's mother had walked out on him several years before that. It was his own mother who was left with the task of raising both of them.

Sylvia White Eagle was a warm, loving woman who more than had her hands filled with a very hostile, rebellious Jackson. Jackson was always rushing off to be with his friends, friends who were interested in grabbing what life hadn't given them. Friends who kept getting him into more and more trouble.

Desperate, Sylvia had turned to Sam, her ex-husband's brother, and Sam had taken Jackson in hand, putting him to work on his ranch. It was there that Jackson got his life back.

As for Garrett, he had joined Jackson and his uncle when his mother died. They worked the ranch together and when Sam passed away, he had left the ranch to both of them.

It was Jackson's idea to start up the Healing Ranch, creating it in Sam's honor. There Jackson and Garrett put Sam's methods to work, using horses as a way to get through to misguided, wayward boys and make them come around rather than turning into hardened criminals.

Since its slow start, the ranch had been growing increasingly successful. Despite that, it wasn't making any money, but that was because Jackson, ever mindful of the dire circumstances some people found themselves in, only charged what he felt the parents or guardians who came to him as their last hope could afford to pay. But their bills to run the ranch just kept on growing.

From what Jackson had let slip recently, they couldn't be ignored too much longer.

And now, Garrett thought, it seemed that Fortune had decided to smile on the Healing Ranch —except that Jackson refused to see it that way.

Garrett was determined not to have him pass up on what just might be their one chance to make things work.

He blew out a frustrated breath. Jackson apparently had stopped paying any attention to the conversation he thought he was having with his brother.

"The Saunders kid is finally ready to get in the saddle," Jackson was saying as he walked toward the front door.

Garrett hurried after him. Spotting Debi in the living room, Garrett immediately enlisted his sister-in-law as an ally. "Debi, talk some sense into this lunkhead you married," he pleaded.

The blonde, green-eyed nurse willingly obliged. "Lunkhead, listen to your brother." Debi smiled at Garrett as she lifted her shoulders in a helpless shrug. "I tried. By the way, what's he supposed to be listening to?"

"The voice of reason," Garrett answered, doing his best to keep his temper.

"Ha!" was Jackson's response. He looked at his wife of three months, appealing for her to back him up. "He wants some woman to come out and follow us around, asking a bunch of questions, snooping and getting in the way."

"Auditioning for a wife, Garrett?" Debi asked her brother-in-law, amused.

"No point. Jackson's already snatched away the love of my life," Garrett replied with a good-natured wink. And then he grew serious. "I'm just trying to find a way to keep the wolf from the door."

As down to earth as her husband, Debi took an active interest in the monetary issues that went into running the school. It was the school that had initially brought her here, looking for a way to get through to her younger brother before he destroyed himself. If possible, she was even more dedicated to keeping the ranch operating than either of the brothers.

"Keep talking," she urged Garrett.

Jackson groaned. "Don't encourage him."

But Garrett was quick to get his sister-in-law to join forces with him. He felt confident that Jackson wouldn't say no to her. "*Western Times Magazine* wants to send a writer to come out and do a story about the ranch."

Surprised, Debi turned toward her husband. "That's wonderful!"

"What's wonderful about it?" Jackson asked. "I've got a ranch to run, I don't have time to answer a bunch of questions."

"Then don't," Debi told him simply. Before Jackson could say something about being vindicated or Garrett could complain that he thought that she would have been on his side, she came through with the natural solution. "Have Garrett do it. He's a lot more outgoing than you are, anyway."

Jackson pretended to scowl. "Thanks."

Debi hooked her arm through his, looking up into his eyes. Her own were sparkling with humor. "But you have all these other fine qualities."

"I guess I do at that." Jackson laughed, allowing himself one quick kiss before he looked at his brother. "Okay, call them and tell 'em she can come."

This time it was Garrett's turn to kiss Debi, planting one on her cheek. "Bless the day you came here, Debi! I'll call them right now before Smiley here changes his mind!"

And with that Garrett raced up the stairs to his room and his computer.

Chapter One

"Really? You're serious? Two weeks before Christmas and you're sending me to Siberia?" Kimberly Lee cried, appalled and stunned.

"Forever, Texas," Stan Saunders corrected her tranquilly.

The editor in chief of *Western Times Magazine*, as well as several other magazines that came under the Union-Post Publishing masthead, was known for his calm, almost monotone demeanor. He had a voice to match. It never rose above a certain level, no matter what was being said or how upset the person on the receiving end might be.

As was the case with Kim, who had asked to see the editor in chief in order to score an assignment for one of the magazines he oversaw. At the time she definitely hadn't set her sights on an article for *Western Times Magazine*, in her opinion the least sophisticated of the magazines in the array.

She'd grown more and more stunned as Stan described the article he wanted and the place that he was sending her to.

"Same thing," Kim complained. Grasping the armrests, she moved to the edge of the chair she'd taken in his glass-enclosed office. "Look, I know I'm just a lowly freelance writer—"

"Yes, you are," Stan agreed all too readily, indicating that she had made her point for him.

Refusing to be deterred, Kim forged on. "But you've *got* to have some other story than this you want me to write."

She stopped just short of pleading, aware that Stan had no use for that sort of tactic. She'd been writing for Stan for a little over a year now, coming in twice a month to see what sort of articles were up for grabs. Each magazine had its own small in-house stable of writers. The slack was taken up by freelance writers who were eager, like her, to prove their worth while earning extra pocket money. Most stitched together a living—if that was their goal rather than just some additional income—by making the rounds to various publishers, as well as haunting blog-oriented websites.

"No, I don't," Stan told her. "It's either this, or come back in a couple of weeks."

She sighed. "I don't have a couple of weeks. My rent check is due now—not to mention that in a couple of weeks, it'll be Christmas and last year, there was nothing to be had," she reminded him.

There was just a hint of concern on the crusty, bald man's face as he asked, "Can't hit up Mom and Dad for the money?"

Kim knew he was aware of her backstory. At least, as much as she'd told to him. Whether or not he remembered it, given how many writers he dealt with, was another matter.

Giving him the benefit of the doubt, she pretended he remembered. “And have them look at me with pity in their eyes?” She shook her head emphatically. “I’d rather die first.”

Stan inclined his head, conceding the point. “Fair enough. How about those two successful sisters of yours? Didn’t you tell me they were surgeons or something like that? They must have money they can lend their little sister.”

Monica and Maureen would have more than readily given her the money she needed, but they were like her parents, convinced that she should have done something better with her life and if nothing else, should now be running, not walking, to the nearest university to enroll and get herself on track for a *real* career, not one that was grounded in make-believe.

That was how her whole family viewed her career path—chasing after make-believe.

More than anything, ever since she could remember, she had dreamed of being a writer, an *important* writer who would someday write that one book people would always remember. Not for a week, or a month, but one that would live on through the decades, a book that would make a real *difference* to people.

In the meantime, she had resigned herself to the fact that she had bills to pay, so any work she could get as a freelance writer had to make do for now.

Almost any work, she silently amended. There *had* to be something else, some other article that didn’t involve sagebrush and horses and brawny, uneducated cowboys.

“See the above answer,” Kim quipped regarding asking her sisters for help.

Stan believed in being helpful, but only up to a point. That point did not include fabricating work for his writers, even if he had come to secretly like their spirit, and Kim was nothing if not the embodiment of that old-fashioned term, *spunk*.

“Well, unless you have a rich sugar daddy tucked away somewhere, or are planning on selling your soul to the devil by midnight to keep that old wolf from the door, I’d say you’d better get busy, pack up your go-bag and book a flight to Laredo.”

“Laredo?” she repeated, confused. “I thought you said that I was going to some place in Texas called Farewell.”

“Forever,” Stan corrected patiently. “And your hearing’s good. You are.”

She didn’t get it. “If I’m going to Forever, why am I flying to Laredo?”

“Simple,” he told her. “Forever doesn’t have an airport. You’re going to have to rent a car and drive the rest of the way. Keep your receipts,” he advised. “There’s a little extra in petty cash. I’ll see what I can do about reimbursing you for some of that.”

This was beginning to sound better and better, she thought, exasperated.

“Do they have indoor plumbing?” she asked. She was only half kidding.

Stan never cracked a smile. “So I hear.” He raised his deep-set eyes to hers. “I also hear they’ve built a hotel.”

Why was he telling her that? “Is there something unusual about it?”

Thin, bony shoulders rose and fell beneath a light gray shirt that appeared to have been slept in at least a couple of times. “Not that I know.”

Okay, she still wasn’t enlightened about the point of this conversation.

“Then why are you...?” And then it hit her. “Wait, you don’t mean that they didn’t have hotels there before this one.”

This time, he did allow a small smile to edge out. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

“What kind of a hellhole *is* this place?” she cried.

“The kind of hellhole where kids whose parents think there’s no reaching them get turned around and become the decent people they were always meant to be.” The editor paused for a long moment, as if silently debating something with himself. Finally, in the same low-key voice he always used, he said, “My nephew, Jordy, is there.”

Kim's dark brown eyes widened. He'd told her it was a sort of reformatory school with horses. That meant his nephew was one of those troubled delinquents he'd mentioned.

"I'm so sorry." She assumed that would be the response Stan was expecting.

But the editor surprised her by saying, "Don't be. That place is the best thing that could have happened to him." The most genuine smile she'd ever seen was curving Stan's lips as he went on to tell her, "My sister Paula said Jordy actually called home last week. Told me he sounded more like himself than he had in the last three years. She was crying those ridiculous happy tears at the time, the ones that you women use to confuse men.

"A place that can do that for a kid, for a family," he went on to say, "well, other people deserve to know about it." He grew very serious now as he looked at her. "You want to do an important story? *This* is an important story," he told her with emphasis. "Go do it and do it right." It was more of an order than an instruction. "You do a good enough job, then we'll talk about where your career could go with the magazines I edit when you get back."

She warned herself not to get excited. There was always a downside to everything. She just hadn't heard all of it yet. "Is that anything like dangling a carrot in front of me?"

"Carrot?" Stan echoed. He permitted himself a dismissive snort. "More like the whole damn bushel. Open your eyes, Lee, and take in the whole picture. I'm giving you a chance here."

Kim tightened her hands on the armrests and pushed herself up to her feet. She knew Stan. She wasn't going to get a better offer no matter how much she battered him. It was up to her to turn what really sounded like a fluff piece to her into something golden. "Then I guess I'm off," she told him.

The phone on his desk was ringing. Stan covered the receiver with his wide, spidery hand, waiting to pick it up.

"Yes, you are," he acknowledged just before he picked up the receiver.

* * *

THIS WASN'T JUST another state, Kim thought as she drove the compact tan Toyota she'd rented at the airport, it was another world. Some parallel universe that perversely coexisted beside the modern, sophisticated one to which she had not only been born, but where she thrived and definitely preferred being.

San Francisco had been home to her for all of her twenty-eight years, and while some of the people she knew claimed to actively love "getting away from it all" by doing things like going camping and hiking in the mountains, the thought of being somewhere where sidewalks were only a theory, not a genuine fact of life, seemed somehow barbaric to her.

Even in her teens, she had never had a desire to be "one with the earth" or to even mildly pretend to be "roughing it." To her, roughing it meant doing without her cell phone or her laptop for half a day and even that made her feel more than vaguely uncomfortable, as if she had lost her hold on civilization, her connection to the outside world.

Which was what she was beginning to feel as she traveled down what she supposed amounted to a two-lane road to this town that seemed to mean so much to Saunders. A town that some of the maps didn't even have listed.

Kim could feel a sense of desperation beginning to build up within her.

"Brigadoon, Stan is sending me to Brigadoon," she muttered under her breath, thinking of the village in the musical revival her mother had all but dragged her to when she was only about nine.

Looking back, she recalled that her mother was always trying to infuse a love of music and culture into her three daughters. Monica and Maureen had lapped it up. She remembered feeling that a play about a town that popped up every hundred years for a day's time before disappearing again was dumb, not to mention scary. Her mother had called her hopeless; her father had come to her defense, calling her a free thinker. But eventually, even he had given up on her.

Both her parents, she knew, wanted her to "be somebody." Her sisters had both followed their example, or at least their father's example. David Lee was a well-respected neurosurgeon at

the prestigious UCSF Medical Center and each of her sisters had their own surgical specialties and enjoyed surgery privileges at the same hospital, making her father exceedingly proud.

Her mother was a law professor at the University of San Francisco. Her classes were always in demand. Which made her, with her BA in Liberal Arts—emphasis on English—the official black sheep of the family.

"You'd think, with an Asian-American father and a mother whose grandparents hailed from Ireland and Scotland, and came here eager to make something of themselves in their adopted county, you'd have some real drive, some kind of ambition to become someone," her mother had lamented when she had informed her parents that she was not applying to either medical school or law school.

Well, she had drive. Only her drive just happened to be in another direction than her parents and sisters had taken.

A drive that was stalling, Kim thought in disgust, with this detour to write a story about a town that was barely a visible dot on the map.

She would have been tempted to say that Stan had made the whole thing up, playing some really bizarre belated April Fool's prank on her two weeks before Christmas—except that she had actually managed to find the damn hole-in-the-wall on her GPS when she'd gotten into the car she'd rented at the airport.

The airport at Laredo had been all right, she supposed. Nothing like what she was used to in San Francisco, but compared to what she was looking at now on her way to Forever, the airport seemed like an absolute Shangri-la.

How did people *survive* in places like this? And why would they even *want* to if they had to live out their whole lives here? Kim couldn't help wondering. There were miles and miles of miles and miles, nothing else in either direction.

All she knew was that if she'd been born in a place like this, she would have saved every dime she could and the moment she graduated high school, she would have been gone—maybe even before then if the opportunity presented itself—but definitely the second she graduated.

There was nothing out here except for desolation, with an occasional ranch thrown in between, but she hadn't even seen one of *those* for an hour now.

People who lived in this part of the country probably looked like dried-up, wrinkled prunes by the time they were thirty-five, she estimated, glancing up toward the sky through her windshield.

Not wanting to usher in the dust, she had her windows rolled up and soon discovered that it was warm in her car. The weather down here was a lot warmer than she was accustomed to this time of year. She shouldn't have wasted her time packing heavy sweaters and jackets, she thought.

You shouldn't have wasted your time coming here at all, a nagging voice in her head that sounded suspiciously like her sister, Monica, whispered to her. *Mom and Dad would have been more than happy to lend you the money—or better yet, have you move back into the house. It's way too big for just the two of them.*

Great, now she was hearing voices. More specifically, Monica's voice.

That was all she needed, to get heatstroke out here, Kim thought in exasperation. Next, she would start hallucinating.

Damn it, she should have held out. There had to be some other story on Stan's docket, something she could have worked on that was a lot closer to home than this. Union-Post Publishing owned a theater magazine, didn't it? Stan could have easily sent her to do some puff piece on the new theater season that was coming next fall. Anything other than this Sagebrush Cowboys Save Troubled Teens thing he wanted her to write.

With every passing minute, she grew more irritable.

She should have stood her ground and dug in. Now it was too late and she was stuck out here. Stuck going to some stupid town called Farewell, or Forever, or Four Miles From Nowhere—

Kim's eyes widened as she stared at the small rectangular screen on the dashboard that had, until a moment ago, been her GPS monitoring unit.

Except now it wasn't.

It wasn't anything.

The screen had gone blank. Desperate, Kim hit the blank screen with the heel of her hand, trying to make it come around. It remained blank.

That was what she got for renting a compact car, she upbraided herself.

Trying to figure out what to do, she pulled the car over to the side of the road—although if she just kept on going, what was the difference? she asked herself. It wasn't as if she'd hit anything. There was nothing for her to hit in either direction, not even a rabbit, or snail, or whatever animals they had out here in the forgotten desert.

With the car idling, Kim shifted in her seat and pulled her purse back onto the passenger seat. Her purse had lunged onto the floor when she'd pulled over a bit too suddenly, spilling, she now saw, its entire contents onto the floor of the car. Everything was in a jumbled heap.

Swallowing a curse, she pulled it all together and deposited it back into her purse—all except for her cell phone. That she took and opened. She swiped past a couple of screens until she found the GPS app that had come preinstalled on her phone.

Despite the fact that she'd lived her entire life in San Francisco, she still managed to get lost on a fairly regular basis and she had come to rely rather heavily on her phone's GPS feature.

A feature which wasn't pulling up, Kim noticed angrily as she stabbed over and over again at the small square image on her phone. When the image finally did enlarge, the words below it irritatingly informed her that it couldn't find a data connection and thus, the very sophisticated feature on her phone containing all the latest bells and whistles wasn't about to ring any of its bells or blow any of its whistles, at least not now. Not until its lost signal was suddenly restored.

"Damn it, I really am in hell," Kim declared, looking around.

There were absolutely no signs posted anywhere to tell her if she was going in the right direction or even if she was going around in circles. For all she knew, she wasn't even in Texas anymore.

The dirt road was too dry and hard to have registered her tire tracks, so she had no idea if she *had* traveled this way before.

"I could be going around in circles until I die from dehydration out here, and nobody'd know the difference—not even me," she lamented.

Why had she ever said yes to this horrible assignment?

For two cents, she'd turn around and go back—except that she had no idea if turning around actually *meant* that she was going back. Maybe if she turned around, she would eventually wind up driving into this town she didn't want to go to?

Damn it, she was confusing herself.

Feeling panicky, Kim looked around the interior of the pristine vehicle to see if there was anything packed in one of the side pockets that could help her.

After foraging around, she discovered an old folded map tucked into the side of the rear passenger door, but when she opened it, she found that the map did her no good. A product of the digital age, she had absolutely no idea how to actually *read* a map.

She was going to die out here, Kim thought, tossing the map aside. She was going to die out here and most likely, no one would ever even find her body.

She still stubbornly didn't regret not going to her parents for money. If she had to die, she would die rebellious and proud.

What did it feel like, she wondered, baking to death inside a low-end economy car? Maybe she should have rented something more high-end, like a Mercedes or a Jaguar. If it was going to wind up being her casket, then maybe—

A flash of something on the hill in the distance caught her eye.

Kim sat up, trying to focus as a glimmer of hope surfaced.

Was that a hallucination, or—?

Chapter Two

Damn but it was hot. This had to be the hottest December day to hit the area as far back as he could remember.

Taking off his tan Stetson, Garrett wiped his brow with the back of his hand, then put his hat back on. For what it was worth, the hat helped keep the sun out of his eyes.

He'd come up on this hill because it afforded him a better view of the surrounding terrain. The road below was flatter than his uncle's voice had been when Sam had sung in the occasional choir, back in the day. To his and Jackson's surprise, the man had been a big believer in going to church and he had made sure to usher the two of them in with him every Sunday.

Even now, he wasn't sure if Sam had exactly been a man of faith, or just someone who believed in the healing power of having a place to go where you were forced to think outside of yourself. Church had perhaps been that place for Sam.

Maybe that wouldn't have been good for some, but it certainly turned out to be good for Jackson and for him, Garrett thought now, still carefully scanning the road below. He would have hated to think where he and his brother would have wound up if it hadn't been for Sam and his rather strict way of doing things.

One thing was for sure, if it hadn't been for Sam, he wouldn't be here right now, looking for a long-overdue magazine writer.

According to the phone call he'd taken from the main editor of the bimonthly magazine doing that story on the Healing Ranch, the writer he'd sent, a woman named Kimberly Lee, should have gotten to them by now. The man who'd called an hour ago said he'd tried to reach her cell phone and received the message that it was out of range—something that was all too familiar around here. The editor had decided to call the ranch.

"She might have gotten lost," the man, a Stan Saunders, had told him. "I told her to get a car with a GPS, but even if she did, it's still possible that she's gotten lost. I called the airport rental agency and they said she rented a tan compact Toyota," he'd added as an afterthought.

The editor had started to recite the license plate to him, but he'd stopped the man, saying it was enough that he had a description of the car. There weren't exactly an abundance of compact Toyotas of any color in this part of Texas.

"People tend to drive Jeeps and trucks out here," he'd told the man. "But to be on the safe side, maybe you could describe your writer to me."

Saunders had immediately rattled off the pertinent details as if he was staring at a picture of the writer. "Kim's five-two, twenty-eight years old, has really dark brown eyes, blue-black hair, straight, chin length, oh, and she's Eurasian, if that helps any," he said as if he'd just remembered the last detail.

"I'll find her," he'd promised the man, more than a little intrigued now by the mental picture he'd formed from Saunders's description.

Before he left, he'd stopped to tell Jackson where he was going because this was the morning he was supposed to be overseeing some of the recent arrivals' progress. Now, because of the missing writer, Jackson was going to have to double up and take his boys, as well as his own.

Not that his brother minded extra work when it came to the teens on the ranch. That was, after all, the entire point of the ranch's existence. But he could see that Jackson minded the *reason* for his being unavailable for a while.

Ordinarily easygoing and unflappable, Jackson had frowned at the prospect of his going out to hunt for the supposedly missing writer.

"If you hadn't said yes to the story in the first place," Jackson had pointed out, "you wouldn't have to go running around, trying to track down the whereabouts of some displaced big-city tenderfoot who could just have gotten herself really lost out there."

"It'll all be worth it in the end," he'd promised Jackson just before he'd gone off.

Of course, he hadn't been all that sure about it at the moment.

And he still wasn't any surer about finding her now. Granted that looking for a tan compact foreign car was somewhat better than looking for a needle in the haystack—but not by much. There was a lot of terrain to cover between Forever and Laredo, and if this woman was really as bad at following directions as that editor had said she was, he just might have to enlist Sheriff Santiago and his deputies to help him find her.

What kind of a Navajo brave are you?

He could almost hear his uncle growling the question at him in that hoarse, gravelly voice of his.

Unlike a great many residents in and around the reservation that was located ten miles outside of Forever, Sam White Eagle had been very proud of his heritage. Proud to be both a Navajo *and* an American, and it was because of Sam that both he and Jackson had their feelings of self-worth and their self-esteem intact.

It hadn't always been that way, at least not for Jackson, who was only half Navajo. The mother who had deserted him had been Caucasian and from what his own mother had told him about the other woman, she had made Jackson feel that his Native American side was what dragged him down.

Jackson had had a lot going against him and to his credit—and Sam's—he had come a long way, Garrett thought. That was part of what he wanted this writer's article to reflect. That Jackson had been the first youthful offender who had been turned around by what he'd learned at the Healing Ranch—even if the ranch hadn't been called that at the time. Back then it had just been a working ranch—and he and Jackson had been the ones doing the working—right alongside their uncle.

These days it was still a working ranch, but its purpose now was a little different from the one it had when Jackson was brought in to work there as a troubled teen.

Damn, how could this woman have gotten lost? Garrett wondered, slowly urging his horse on. The road was fairly straight from Laredo to here. All she had to do was stay on it.

There were no storms anywhere in that stretch of land to divert her, not even one brewing on the horizon, according to the latest weather report, so where the hell was she?

Garrett squinted as he stared out along the road below. Even from here, he should be able to see the dust the car was kicking up.

Okay, so the car was tan and that didn't exactly stand out immediately in this area. If she'd rented a car that was a royal blue, the color that was still pretty popular in the glossy magazine ads he looked at on occasion, she would be easier to spot. But even in a tan car, he felt he could still find her. It was just harder.

But harder didn't mean impossible. It just meant that—

Garrett abruptly stopped giving himself a pep talk and really stared down at the road below him. There was something pulled over to the side.

It was a tan compact car.

Her car, he thought triumphantly. He'd found her, Garrett congratulated himself.

There was no cloud of dust, big or little, coming from around it. Now that he had finally spotted it, he saw that the vehicle wasn't moving.

Why wasn't it moving? he wondered in the next heartbeat. Had she run out of gas, or had the car just died?

And then an even worse thought suddenly occurred to Garrett.

Had the woman passed out for some reason?

With women like his late mother, Sylvia, Miss Joan, the tart-tongued woman with the heart of gold who owned the diner, and now Debi, the nurse who had married his brother, populating his life, he was accustomed to thinking of women as inherently strong. He was used to women like Debi who rolled up her sleeves, went out and got the job done, not women who fainted at the first sign of trouble.

From what he'd managed to gather from the editor he'd talked to, this woman from the magazine might very well fall into the latter group, not the former.

If that was the case, whether she was spooked or had fainted, he had better get down there to her pronto. There was no telling what sort of condition this woman was in—and how that might, ultimately, reflect on the Healing Ranch.

He knew that was a selfish thought, but when it came to Jackson, he could be as selfish as he had to be.

The fastest way from where he was to where she was down below was straight down the hillside. It was the fastest way, but definitely not the easiest.

"You up to this, boy?" he asked, patting his golden palomino's neck.

There was no question that the stallion he had raised from a foal was sure-footed, but he had never actually put Wicked to the test, at least not for more than a couple of feet.

Garrett looked down, undecided. It was a lot more than a couple of feet between where he was and where the woman's car was.

"This is going to be tricky," he said.

The words were intended for him rather than for the horse he regarded as more than just an animal. Wicked and he had a strong bond, and the horse would push himself to the limit for him. That was just the way things were.

At the same time, he didn't want to do anything that just might cause the stallion to injure himself.

"You've got to go nice and slow, a little bit at a time." He spoke in a steady, firm cadence, encouraging the horse. "But you can do it."

Garrett was completely aware that once they started, there was no turning back, no do-overs. They could only continue on the path they were on. But he felt he had no choice, he had to try it. The woman might be hurt, which was probably why she was pulled over like that and if she was hurt, then time was important and going the other roundabout route would take him at least three times as long.

Mentally crossing his fingers and all but holding his breath, Garrett gave Wicked the command to start down the side of the hill. The horse obeyed.

He held on to the reins as tightly as he dared, not wanting to pull the horse back too much because he was afraid that it might cause Wicked to either grow skittish or actually rear back, neither of which would end well for them.

What ultimately resulted was something that, to the casual observer, looked as if the horse was sliding down the hillside in slow motion, his front hooves going first, sending bits and pieces of dirt and a little grass raining down ahead of him. The same, a little less forcefully, was happening with the back hooves.

Progress was slow and careful, but after what felt like an eternity later to Garrett, he and Wicked were on flat ground at the bottom of the hill several feet away from the parked car.

The feeling of relief was almost dizzying. He couldn't help wondering if Wicked felt the same way.

"Extra lumps of sugar for you today when we get back," Garrett promised, leaning over slightly in the saddle in order to pat the horse's neck. Both of them, he noticed, were sweating. He felt more connected to the palomino than ever.

"Hell, extra lumps of sugar for you for a week," Garrett amended. "You could have sent me flying right over your head and breaking my fool neck with just one misstep," he acknowledged with more than a little feeling. "Thanks for not doing that." He took a breath, steadying what he realized was a ragged case of nerves. "Now let's see what's wrong with this tenderfoot," he proposed to his four-footed companion.

Still not knowing what to expect, he guided Wicked closer to the car, then dismounted. With the reins held tightly in one hand, he approached the vehicle slowly, then peered into its interior.

Garrett was still about three feet away from the tan car when the driver's door swung open and a petite woman in tight jeans and what looked like a suede, fringed jacket jumped out like a jack-in-the-box on a delayed timer.

Looking at her, he couldn't decide whether she looked terrified and was attempting to hide it, or if she was braced for a fight but undecided as to how to defend herself.

Pressing her back against the opened driver's side door, the woman shouted at him. "I don't have any money on me!"

"That's okay," he told her, staying put for the moment even as he raised his free hand in a gesture to reassure her. "I wasn't going to ask you for any—and why are you yelling?"

Maybe it was his imagination, but the woman—he had no idea that they made writers so sexy—looked a little chagrined, as well as leery. "So you can hear me."

"I can hear you just fine even if you lowered your voice. As a matter of fact, maybe even better," he amended, trying to get her to smile.

So far, it wasn't working.

Because Kim had absolutely no idea how to defend herself in this sort of a situation, she was forced to make it up as she went along. Why hadn't she thought to pack her can of mace? Did mace even work on a horse if he used the horse to attack her?

Even as she started to talk, it sounded lame to her ear. Despite the fact that she had lived her entire life in San Francisco, she had never been in a situation where she felt threatened. She'd had to come out here for that, she thought grudgingly. She was going to find a way to get even with Saunders if it was the last thing she ever did.

"I'm not alone. I've got people coming," she announced, raising her voice again as if the increased volume would bring these "people" faster—either that or scare him away.

"Are you Kimberly?" he asked, even as he searched his brain for the last name that the editor had told him. The last name that was temporarily eluding him.

And then he remembered.

"Kimberly Lee?" he asked.

The woman's eyes widened even more. He would have found it hypnotic under any other circumstances.

"How do you know my name?" she demanded nervously.

He couldn't get over how adorable she looked. Spooked, most likely feisty if her stance was any indication, but definitely adorable. He began to relax. He could work with adorable. Adorable women were his specialty.

"Well, I could try to dazzle you with a few mysterious answers, tell you my ancestors were into reading minds—" and then he cracked a grin "—but the truth of it is, your editor told me."

The woman eyed him suspiciously. "Miles?" she asked.

"No, that's not the name he gave me. I think he said it was Stan—" Garrett searched his memory again—names were not his long suit. And, just like with her last name, he remembered. Belatedly. "Stan Saunders, that's it."

How could he have forgotten that last name? he upbraided himself. It was the same as one of the boys Jackson had been personally working with. A dark-eyed, defiant kid who had taken more time to get through to than most of the rest.

He caught himself wondering if there was some sort of a connection between the kid and the editor, then decided probably not. Saunders wasn't *that* unusual a name. Most likely it was just a coincidence. Unlike his brother, he believed that there was such a thing as coincidences and moreover, he believed that they happened more than just once in a while.

"You talked to Stan Saunders?" Kim asked, surprised.

Looking at the tall, dark-haired man for the first time—*really* looking at him, she realized that he might be the main man she was supposed to interview. And then again, she wouldn't have been

able to actually swear to it. It hadn't been a very good picture, just something she'd managed to find in a local newspaper article.

"What about?" she asked, still suspicious.

"He got worried when he couldn't reach you on your cell phone." Garrett remained where he was. He had a feeling that if he tried to get closer, she just might run. Not that there was anywhere to run to, but he'd still have to catch her and it was too hot for that kind of exertion. "He asked me to find you."

"You're Jackson?" she asked, still a little on her guard but she had to admit that she was feeling less defensive than she'd been a minute ago.

"Garrett," he corrected. "The *other* White Eagle," he added with a touch of humor.

He had a nice smile, she thought. But then, she'd read somewhere that Ted Bundy had a nice smile. Still, she began to relax.

"Well, Garrett-the-other-White-Eagle, you have no cell reception out here," she complained. And then to prove her point, she held up the phone that still wasn't registering a signal.

Garrett nodded. "It's been known to happen on occasion," he acknowledged.

She was right. This was a hellhole. "How long an occasion?" she asked.

The shrug was quick and generally indifferent, as if there were far more important matters to tend to. "It varies." He nodded at her compact. "What's wrong with your car?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Nothing, I just didn't want to drive it if I didn't know where I was going." A small pout accompanied the next accusation. "I lost the GPS signal."

Garrett took that in stride. Nothing unusual about that either, he supposed, even though neither he nor anyone he knew even had a GPS in their car. They relied far more on their own instincts and general familiarity with the area.

He did move just a little closer now. He saw that she was watching him, as if uncertain whether or not to trust him yet. He could see her side of it. After all, it was just the two of them out here and she only had his word for who he was.

"You can follow me, then," he told her, then added with a smile that was intended to dazzle her—several of Miss Joan's waitresses had told him his smile was one of his best features, "Consider me your guiding light."

You're cute, no doubt about that, but I'll hold off on the whole guiding-light thing, if you don't mind, Kim thought.

She stifled a sigh as she got in behind the wheel of her car. She *knew* she should have dug in and fought getting stuck with this assignment.

Chapter Three

Well, Kim thought wryly, following close behind Garrett, she had to admit that this was certainly different. She was definitely *not* accustomed to being treated to the rear view of a horse.

Granted, Garrett created a rather intriguing, captivating specimen of manhood, sitting atop his horse the way he was, but she hadn't come here to stare at the back of some man, muscular and impressive though he might appear to be.

Garrett White Eagle—if that was who he really was and she had only his word for that—seemed nice enough, but for all she knew, that engaging smile of his could be hiding the soul of a sadist.

A sadist who lured trusting women off to some obscure hideaway where no one would ever find them—or her—until years later.

A hideaway in a hole-in-the-wall. Now there was irony for you. Maybe she should flee now while she still could.

Kim's hands tightened on the steering wheel and she was all set to execute a U-turn and make her getaway when she saw it.

A ranch house in the distance.

So there really *was* a ranch out here. Maybe this was actually all on the level after all, which meant that Garrett White Eagle actually *was* Garrett White Eagle, just as he claimed to be.

Kim's relief at spotting the ranch—civilization at last—was rather short-lived when she took a closer look at the actual structure she was driving toward.

Garrett turned around just then, as he had been doing every couple of minutes to make sure that she was still following him.

"Something wrong?" Garrett asked, pulling up on Wicked's reins.

Even though he was leading the way and going so slowly he was afraid Wicked would fall asleep in midstep, the woman didn't exactly fill him with confidence about her navigational skills.

He saw the stunned expression on Kim's face. Her mouth had all but dropped open.

Now what?

When her eyes shifted toward him, he saw the confusion in them.

"Where's the main house?" she asked, then said, "That's the cook's quarters, right?"

Garrett inclined his head, as if in agreement. "Uh-huh. The cook's quarters, the main ranch hand's quarters, Jackson's quarters—along with his wife, Debi—and, oh yes, my quarters, too."

"All of you live there?" she asked, as if the concept hadn't quite sunk in.

"Uh-huh." His eyes never left her face.

Kim's eyes widened as her driving definitely slowed down to almost a crawl. It was as if her little car had gone on automatic pilot and was now driving itself.

She chewed on her lower lip before asking, "That's the main house?" If she was trying to hide the appalled note in her voice, she was failing.

He had to admit, after having talked to her for a couple of minutes, her reaction didn't come as much of a surprise.

Garrett laughed. "Let me guess, you were expecting South Fork."

Her eyebrows knitted together, as she struggled to hide her disappointment over the building she saw. "South Fork?" she echoed. "What's that?"

"Something obviously before your time," he told her. Then, not wanting to seem old in her eyes, he added, "Before mine, too. Except that I like watching old, classic TV programs. To answer your question, South Fork was this big, sprawling fictional ranch just outside of Dallas that belonged to this really rich family whose members were always arguing and at each other's throats all the time. But I've got to admit, the ranch house they had was a thing of beauty," he told her. "This might not be South Fork," he allowed, "but it's all ours."

There was no missing the pride in his voice.

To each his own, Kim thought, stifling the urge to shrug at his response. If that ranch house up ahead had been hers, she would have done whatever she needed to in order to make it look better in a hurry—and then she would have sold it as fast as she could before the buyer could think twice about the wisdom of getting stuck with a rundown house and a ranch that wasn't producing much of anything except work.

As if reading her mind, Garrett leaned down from his horse and promised, "It'll grow on you."

She wasn't going to be here long enough for that to happen, but for now, she kept that fact to herself.

Before she'd left, she had told Stan that she would write the best article she could on the Healing Ranch, but after seeing the place, she estimated it shouldn't take her more than a day to whip up her article. Two if she deliberately stalled and didn't get started for the first day.

And since she wanted to get out of Prairie Gulch as fast as she could, she would get started as fast as she could.

Kim prided herself on knowing how to put someone at ease so that they would confide in her.

Looking at the house as she drew closer, she promised herself to "make nice" with the people out here, get her story—or rather Stan's story since he was the one who was so keen on it, not her—

and then get back home. If she were particularly diligent, she'd be back in time to hand Stan her copy and then go shopping at Barneys, the New York–based department store that had found a second home in San Francisco and had become one of her treasured stomping grounds of choice.

With that in mind, Kim turned up her smile several watts and told her guide in the sweetest voice possible, "I think it's charming."

Garrett laughed, not taken in for a second, although he had to admit she was the prettiest liar he'd ever had to deal with.

"No, you don't," he contradicted. "But that's okay, it's not supposed to be 'charming.' It's supposed to be functional. And it is. This is where the 'bad' boys get sent in order to be turned into human beings, something that my brother, Jackson, does, time and again, very, very well."

"And you? What do you do?" she asked. She'd stopped driving for a moment and was taking in the ranch in its entirety.

Did it get any less run-down from close up? She certainly hoped so. She was planning on taking a few photographs to go with her article and right now, she didn't see a good angle to use for her shots of the ranch house's exterior.

"Anything I have to," Garrett said in response, his voice dropping by an octave or so. Enough to get her attention and have her wondering things that wouldn't be finding their way into the article.

"Define 'anything,'" she requested in a mildly intrigued voice.

"Just what it sounds like," he replied, looking at her and punctuating his answer with a wink that seemed to flutter directly down into her stomach, causing just the slightest mini–tidal wave to take place there.

Kim paused to take in a discreet breath before continuing. The breath was to help steady her unexpected reaction to this dusty cowboy who fancied himself a ladies' man.

"I'll pin you down for details later," she told him. "Right now, I'd like to meet your brother before I go into town to see about my hotel reservation." She glanced at her watch before continuing to drive toward the ranch house. "I'm already running late," she realized. "How long will they hold a room at the hotel?"

Garrett had to struggle to keep the laugh from surfacing. The hotel wasn't exactly beating off patrons with a stick.

"As long as it takes," he finally replied. The corners of his mouth curved despite his best efforts to keep a straight, if not dour face.

She wondered if everyone in this quaint little dust bowl of a town talked in circles. Just what was he telling her about her hotel room? "I don't think I understand."

"We don't exactly have a lot of tourists coming through Forever," he told her. "There's no danger of losing your room to someone else, not unless a twister suddenly comes through, taking down every building except for the hotel. That happens, *then* you might have to be concerned about losing your room to someone else if they get there first. But until then, I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. You're in the driver's seat, trust me."

That didn't make any sense to her. "If that's the case, how does the hotel stay in business?"

"Good question," he acknowledged. Kim struggled not to feel resentful, as if she was being patronized. "The hotel belongs to this construction company that sees it as getting some sort of a toehold in the region," he went on to explain. "The owner's not in it for the money," he confided. "The way matters had turned out, the general contractor wound up owning the building—and she'd married Finn Murphy, so her stake in building up the town has definitely gone up."

"That doesn't seem possible," Kim told him, certain that Garrett was making this all up, trying to pull the wool over the outsider's eyes with this tall tale. Who wasn't in it for the money? If not that, then they were in it for the prestige, the way her parents were. And this was definitely *not* a place someone came in order to build up their reputation.

Just how naive did this man think she was?

Did she come across as naive? Kim caught herself suddenly wondering.

That was *not* the image she was going for. Smart, sassy, capable, *those* were the buzz words she was after, not *naive.*

"A lot of things in Forever and the places around it don't really seem possible," Garrett informed her. "Forever isn't exactly your run-of-the-mill kind of place."

"Oh, God, just like Brigadoon," Kim murmured under her breath before she could think better of it and stop herself.

Garrett had overheard her despite the fact that she had meant the comment only for herself, but the reference went right over his head.

"Like what?" he asked, looking at her quizzically.

A strapping he-man like Garrett White Eagle undoubtedly thought all musicals were products of stupid, self-involved minds. She wasn't about to give him ammunition to use against her. This job was going to be hard enough as it was. She wanted to be taken seriously—even by this cowboy.

"Never mind," Kim said dismissively. "It's not a real place, anyway."

Garrett had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, but he felt it wasn't really polite to tell her that. So, at least for now, he just let Kim's remark slide.

"Well, Forever's real, all right," he assured her. "It's just different."

She took a deep breath, more than a little relieved to be able to distance herself from the subject. "I'm beginning to see that," she replied.

She drove the rest of the short distance to the ranch house and got out of her car. Garrett dismounted almost parallel to her vehicle and let the palomino's reins drop to the ground in front of him.

Walking away from Wicked, he stepped onto the front porch.

Kim looked at his horse uncertainly. She fully expected to be trampled any second if the horse got it into his head that she was standing in his way, blocking his access to something.

"Aren't you going to tie him up?" she asked, shifting closer to Garrett.

She was banking on him protecting her if the horse suddenly went rogue—or whatever it was called when horses charged at people for no reason.

"Wicked's not into bondage," Garrett told her with a grin.

The cowboy was making fun of her because she was clearly out of her element, she thought. Since she needed his help—at least for the moment—she did her best not to act offended.

Instead, she told herself to try harder to get on this cowboy's good side. The faster she got this story down, the faster she'd be back in San Francisco, mistress of her own fate—with her rent paid.

"No, I mean won't your horse take off if you don't tie his reins to something?" she pointed out.

"Not unless you plan to scare him," Garrett said with a laugh. And then he answered her question more seriously. "Wicked's trained to stay wherever I put down his reins. He knows not to run off," he told her. "That comes in handy when we're out on the range and there's nothing to tie him to."

Kim glanced from the horse to his rider. She wouldn't have known how to begin to train an animal for something like that—which was why, among other reasons, she'd never gotten a pet.

"That's pretty clever," she said honestly.

"Wicked's pretty clever," Garrett corrected, giving the animal he had trained the credit he felt the stallion deserved.

While he regarded animals to be smarter than a lot of people realized, he was aware that, like people, some animals were smarter than others. In his estimation, Wicked was exceedingly smart.

"Be right back," Garrett told her, going inside the house.

"Okay," Kim said cheerfully. The man was modest. Getting on his good side with flattery was going to be harder than she thought, but she was determined to do it. If she could get him to open up, she was confident that all the details she needed for this article would just come pouring out of him and the story would wind up writing itself.

Twenty-four hours and she was going to be out of here, she promised herself.

Thirty-six at the most.

Life with two overachieving parents and two overachieving sisters had taught her to hedge her bets—up to a point. Although, from what she could see, there wasn't anything to write about here that could possibly keep her for even as long as a whole day, could it? she wondered. The brothers had a ranch, they worked with so-called troubled kids and they had some horses around. End of story. The challenge would be to flesh all that out to even a minimum length of words.

Kim frowned to herself. She doubted that *anyone* would want to read what she'd just outlined in her head. There *had* to be some kind of an angle she could use to at least make this article somewhat interesting instead of the snooze-fest it was shaping up to be.

"Jackson's not here," Garrett told her as he came out of the house a couple of minutes after he'd gone in. "He's probably at the corral, still working with the boys."

"Okay." Turning around on her heel, she left the porch and headed toward her vehicle again.

Instead of following her, Garrett remained where he was—on the porch—and watched her. When he saw her opening the door on the driver's side, he asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm getting into the car."

"Why?"

Maybe she'd misjudged the man's mental acuity. He certainly hadn't struck her as being slow, but what other explanation could there be for his not understanding what she was telling him?

"So I can drive to the corral." He wasn't picking up his horse's reins. Why? "You are going to lead the way on your horse, right?"

Instead of taking Wicked's reins, he came around to her side of the vehicle.

"You don't need the car," he told her, shutting the door for her. "We'll walk."

"Walk?" Kim echoed in surprise, as if she was unable to fully grasp the concept.

"Walk," he repeated gently, taking her hand in his and fully intending to coax her along if he had to. "It's what people do when they put one foot in front of the other." He grinned. "You'd be amazed at how much ground you can cover that way."

Kim was hardly listening to him. Instead, she looked around the immediate surrounding area. She didn't see anything beside the ranch house.

"Just how far away is the corral?" she asked.

Amusement highlighted his eyes, but he managed to keep a straight face as he replied, "Close enough not to have to take a canteen with us."

The straight face didn't fool her for a second. This time, she called him on it. "You're making fun of me, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't dream of it," he told her innocently, then added, "I might, however, be teasing you a little." In the next breath, he apologized. "Sorry, I don't get to have much fun. Working with Jackson and a bunch of boys can get pretty serious at times and I don't get into town much."

She sincerely doubted that. She might not know much about ranches and towns in the middle of nowhere, but she felt she was pretty good when it came to judging people, and Garrett White Eagle did *not* strike her as a man who was resigned to living some sort of a monastic life. He looked, instead, like a man who knew how to have a good time.

He also struck her as someone who knew how to read people and work an angle.

This ranch, it suddenly occurred to her now that she wasn't distracted, cursing at defunct Wi-Fi signals and guidance systems that refused to guide, could be a perfect source of income. Parents were known to become desperate when it came to trying to save an offspring who was on the road to self-destruction. One that would bring them everlasting shame, not to mention huge lawyer fees and who knew what all else if those kids really got going. And then one day, they hear about this supposedly altruistic place that promises to heal their wayward liability, turn him into a pillar of society for what they were probably told would be a "reasonable" sum of money.

Who wouldn't be sucked into taking a chance on that? Especially when rehabs were notorious for their rate of turning out repeat violators.

An article like that could almost write itself, she thought as she all but trotted next to Garrett, doing her best to keep up.

But why bother when Garrett could practically write it for her? Or, at the very least, give her the lead she wanted to go with.

"Just how much can you and your brother pad the bills for these boys without arousing the parents' suspicions?" she asked, almost sounding breathless as the question came out of her mouth.

Garrett stopped dead in his tracks just shy of the corral. Had he just heard what he *thought* he just heard? Because, if he had, the last thing he needed or wanted was for Jackson to get wind of this writer's current mind-set.

He needed to change her mind, fast—or, barring that, he needed to send her on her way.

Also fast.

Chapter Four

Garrett wasn't about to take another step until he got this cleared up.

If Jackson even caught a hint about what this woman was mistakenly thinking regarding the Healing Ranch's bottom line, the interview—and any business resulting from it—would be totally dead in the water, especially since Jackson hadn't been keen on having someone do an in-depth article on the ranch in the first place.

Garrett approached denial carefully, knowing that if he was heated in expressing his feelings, Kim was bound to think there was a story buried here.

"I don't think you have the right idea about what we do here," he told her.

Kim had given up believing in an altruistic world a long time ago—probably somewhere around the time she went into kindergarten, thanks to her older sisters who had made sure that she knew there was no Santa Claus, no magical elf who gave for the sake of giving.

Kim believed that everyone, no matter who they were, wanted to get ahead. That didn't necessarily make it a bad thing. After all, money was what made the world go around. Wasn't she here, doing a story that held no interest for her and was nothing more than a puff piece, just because she needed to pay the rent?

"From what I'm told by my editor—who's very high on this place, by the way—you and your brother do a really good job with these troubled teens, so why shouldn't you be compensated?"

"There's a difference between 'compensated' and the word you used. 'Padded' has a whole different meaning attached to it," he pointed out.

She hadn't meant to insult him. If anything she admired the White Eagles for what they did. They were good at something and they were making it pay off while helping kids out, as well. It seemed like a win-win situation from where she stood. Why did this cowboy look as if she was guilty of throwing rocks at his brother and him?

"Look, no offense intended, Garrett," she told him. "But this all can't be strictly charitable work that's happening here. After all, you've got to be able to survive. No one's going to fault you for that," she assured him.

Garrett took a breath. He had to find a way to set her straight and make her understand. "We don't do it for free—"

"That's all I'm saying—"

Garrett shook his head. He still didn't think she understood what Jackson was doing here. "That's not what I'm hearing, though," he said. "The parents, or guardians if there're no parents in the picture, are charged for the teen's room and board."

"What else?" Kim prodded.

"There is no 'else,'" Garrett told her. He hadn't thought she was jaded, but he'd obviously misjudged her. "I see where you're going with this and in this case, you're on the wrong path." He

didn't want her thinking he was being preachy or coming off holier-than-thou. He had a feeling she'd skewer him, Jackson *and* the ranch if that was the impression she came away with.

"Not that I didn't try to get Jackson to charge a little more just so we could get ahead of the game—and by 'ahead' I mean get a little money put aside for the low periods so we could keep the place open even if there aren't enough teens here needing to be set straight for us to cover the bills."

He paused, trying to choose his words well. If he couldn't get through to her, from his point of view there would be no reason to continue this interview—but he had a feeling she'd still write a piece and it just might not be the kind he was hoping for—and Jackson would really have a reason to be angry.

That meant he *had* to get her to understand what they—especially Jackson—were doing here.

"Right now, we're in the red, which is why I talked Jackson into agreeing to let you do this story."

"Wait, he doesn't want me writing about what you're doing here at the Healing Ranch?" Kim asked, surprised. She assumed that everyone wanted free publicity. The only people who didn't had something to hide.

"Jackson's very private and he didn't want any of the boys put under a microscope, either," he explained. "I was the one who talked him into it because I was hoping that the exposure might make more people aware of the ranch's existence. I figure that the more people know, the more people might want to send their kids here. And that way, we get to stay on top of our bills instead of one step ahead of foreclosure."

She would have to do more research to find out just how much of what Garrett had just said was actually true. He certainly seemed sincere enough—but so did the most successful con artists. Just because Garrett was ruggedly handsome with soulful eyes didn't make him honest or selfless.

She played devil's advocate. "That sounds very melodramatic," she told him.

Garrett shrugged and she found herself captivated by the way his broad shoulders rose and fell.

"It's also very true—not that that's something Jackson wants made public, either," he warned. "I'm only telling you this so that you drop the notion that my brother is lining his pockets with the extorted money of worried-sick parents. The charges vary and depend on how long the kid stays. As for those parents who can't afford to pay for the Healing Ranch but whose kid really needs to come to a place like this, Jackson lets them make payment schedules they can live with."

He could see that the woman was still somewhat skeptical. He knew it was against Jackson's rules, but he gave her an example to back up what he was saying, omitting only the people's actual names.

"One family's kid was here when he was twelve—a real hellion, by the way. He's about to graduate high school this coming June—and they're still making payments."

"He charged them that much?" Kim asked, stunned.

"No." Was the woman baiting him? Garrett wondered. "Jackson made the payments that small—after giving them a discount. The kid's father was a wounded vet, his mother was an elementary school teacher. They had two more kids at home." There were times when his brother exasperated him, but he had to admit that when the dust finally settled, he was nothing if not damn proud of Jackson. "I'm the greedy one in the family—Jackson remembers his roots."

She waited a beat and when Garrett didn't say anything to fill her in, she asked, "And those roots are—?"

"—for him to tell you about." Jackson would be the best judge on how much he wanted to let the woman know, Garrett thought. "I've already done too much talking," he told her.

In her view, there was no such thing as too much talking. "I thought this was both your stories," she pointed out, trying to flatter Garrett. In her experience, people always talked as long as they felt they had a friendly audience.

Garrett, apparently, would be the exception that proved the rule.

"No," he contradicted. "It's Jackson's story. I'm just along for the ride."

Kim frowned slightly. She sincerely doubted that. From what Stan had told her, it seemed as if both brothers ran this ranch and shared equally in the work it took to oversee anywhere between four to ten teenaged boys at a time. At least half, she assumed, were really problematic.

Garrett began walking again. She fell into place beside him.

"Why boys?" she asked suddenly just before they approached the corral.

The question had come out of the blue without any connection to what she'd asked last. It caught him off guard. "Excuse me?"

"Why boys?" Kim repeated. This question she intended to get an honest answer to, no matter how much he danced around it. "You only have boys here. Why not girls, too?" She watched his face closely as she went on. "Or don't you and your brother consider girls worth helping?"

If he didn't feel that there was a lot riding on this, he would have been amused at the dogged way she kept trying to unearth something less than flattering about the way the ranch was run. But there *was* a lot riding on this, so he wanted her to get it right.

"It's not like that," he told her, then offered a speculation as he continued, "I suppose that there are more boys who get in trouble than girls—"

"Or maybe the girls just don't get caught."

"Maybe," Garrett allowed. "It might also be that it's easier working with boys if they're not distracted," he pointed out, "and girls can be a really huge distraction to guys."

The way he said it, looking deep into her eyes, suddenly had her pulse racing.

I bet you're really something else when you get going, aren't you, Garrett White Eagle? she thought, doing her best to get her breathing back under control. For a second it had felt as if the very air had just backed up in her lungs and then *stayed* there.

"Is that what you think?" Kim asked him when she finally found her tongue. "That girls are a huge distraction?"

"I don't 'think,'" Garrett retorted, then added, "I know."

His face, when he leaned over her like that, was just inches away from hers and for one moment, she thought he was going to follow through on what she was certain was on his mind. He was going to kiss her and she had to admit that she didn't exactly find the prospect off-putting.

But the next moment, the whimsical smile was back on his lips again as he straightened up, putting distance between their faces—and her sanity returned. Getting physically involved with the subject of her article—or at least *one* of the subjects—was definitely a bad idea.

Even though he was awfully appealing.

"Why don't I introduce you to my brother?" he was suggesting as her mind did cartwheels off in the corner somewhere.

When he looked at her like that, she found that she actually had to summon up saliva in order to say anything in response—the inside of her mouth had gone that dry.

"Why don't you?" she agreed, doing her best not to croak out the words.

C'mon, Kim, get a grip, she told herself sternly, doing her best to focus on what had brought her here in the first place—she was doing a story that would allow her to pay her rent. Getting distracted was no way to become a celebrated writer—or even build a reputation that would amount to a hill of beans.

All she was trying to do now was keep the wolf from the door.

It occurred to her, as the thought flashed through her mind, that she had something in common with Jackson White Eagle after all.

At that point, they had reached the corral and she was acutely aware that everyone—with the exception of the tall, dark-haired cowboy in the center, the man she took to be Garrett's older brother—had stopped what they were doing and turned to look at her.

While she was accustomed to covert attention—even liked it—blatant attention was something new, especially when it came from those who couldn't vote yet.

"Why are they all staring?" she asked Garrett in what she hoped was a really low whisper.

Garrett grinned as he spared her a longer-than-necessary look. "Off hand, I could think of several reasons, none of which I can share with you without risking getting slapped."

She laughed shortly and shook her head. "Is that your idea of a compliment?"

"No," he replied with a deliberately innocent expression, "that's my idea of the truth."

She took a quick inventory of the teens in the corral. While most looked respectfully polite, none of them looked as if they were even remotely naive or backward. Just what kind of bill of goods was Garrett trying to sell her?

"You're telling me that these boys aren't used to women?" It wasn't so much a question as an accusation.

"No, but with the possible exception of my sister-in-law, I'd say that they're definitely not used to women who look like you."

"Eurasian?" she guessed. Kim was well aware that in a backwoodsy place like this, she didn't exactly blend in with the local population for obvious reasons.

"Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of the word *gorgeous*," he told her.

This one was a smooth operator who used his charm to get by, Kim thought. "Emphasis on the word *line*."

"Well, if we're going to be emphasizing words, in this case I'd zero in on the word *truth*," he told her with the same casual air he might have employed rattling off all the merits of his favorite beer.

Casual, but at the same time, loaded. The man was single-handedly raising the immediate temperature around her. He was definitely smooth. As smooth as any so-called stud she might have encountered in one of the upscale watering holes or restaurants in San Francisco.

"What are you doing in a place like this?" she asked him honestly. He was the type she would have figured would be chomping at the bit to get out of town and the first one to take off the moment his high school diploma hit his hand.

"Helping my brother," Garrett answered without a moment's hesitation. His eyes met hers and she could feel her stomach tighten just a sliver. "I thought you already knew that."

"I was filled in," Kim acknowledged. "But there's a difference between being told something and understanding why."

"Nothing to understand," Garrett assured her as Jackson, finally finished with instructing one of his "hands," as he referred to the teens, approached them. "This ranch saved my brother's life and when he wanted to return the favor, or rather, pass it on, he asked me to help him. There was no way I would have ever turned my back on that."

"So you're the loyal type." In her family, it was competition rather than loyalty that ruled. At least, between her sisters—and possibly her parents, as well. She was the one on the outside, the one who merited their pity and just maybe her sisters' smug superiority.

"Something like that," Garrett allowed.

The next moment, he took the opportunity to table this uncomfortable discussion and did the honors of introducing his brother to the woman he had convinced Jackson should come here.

As he handled the introductions, Garrett mentally crossed his fingers and prayed he wasn't going to regret this.

And that Jackson wouldn't wind up holding it against him.

"Jackson," he smiled broadly at his older brother, "this is Kimberly Lee. She's the writer that *Western Times Magazine* sent to write about our work here at the Healing Ranch."

Jackson, Kim immediately noted, was as tall and as handsome as his younger brother. His face was a little leaner and his cheekbones were a bit more prominent, but their hair was equally sleek and black and their eyes were both a surprising, intense, remarkable shade of blue.

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