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# More Than A Cowboy

Susan Hornick



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# Содержание

“Hi, I’m Sarah.”	5
SUSAN HORNICK	6
More Than A Cowboy	7
Contents	8
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	25
Chapter Three	35
Chapter Four	48
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	57



## **“Hi, I’m Sarah.”**

The little girl held Jared’s gaze with gray-green eyes. A wave of pain ripped through him; pain so intense it stole his breath. This child was a feminine replica of his brother. She had to be Mitch’s daughter. Sarah was the secret Haley was hiding, the secret that may have cost his brother his life.

He watched the color drain from Haley’s face. Like a bear protecting her young, she moved between him and Sarah, then Sarah skipped off to the barn.

“She’s my brother’s daughter, isn’t she?” he asked when Sarah was out of earshot. The question nearly choked him. “What really happened the night Mitch died?”

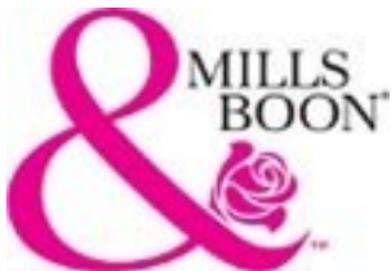
# SUSAN HORNICK

Susan Hornick lives in Colorado with her husband, two horses and a cat. As a child on her grandparents' farm, she loved creating stories in her head, which later translated into journals, short stories and finally novels. Her writing won numerous awards before finally finding a home in the inspirational market.

When not writing or spending time with her family, her biggest passion is visiting historical places—especially old cemeteries—and wilderness camping with her husband and friends, where she explores old ghost towns and wide open spaces from the back of her horse. Visit her on the Web at [www.susanhornick.com](http://www.susanhornick.com).

# More Than A Cowboy

## Susan Hornick



Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old.

Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.

—Isaiah 43:18–19

Deepest gratitude to Sharon, Pam, Janet, Kay, Robin, Peggy, Teresa, Alice and Heidi for their input. Also my husband, who relinquished “our time” so I could pound on the computer keys. And always, my children, Megan and Jon, who are as beautiful on the inside as they are on the outside, and my mom—who said “FINISH THE BOOK.”

# Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Epilogue

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

# Chapter One

The rodeo announcer's voice blared over the loudspeaker signaling the day's final events for Cheyenne Frontier Days' rodeo competition. Haley Clayton wiped her sweaty brow and pushed through the crowd toward the bull pens lined up behind the arena.

A whistle from a nearby cowboy quickened her step. She ignored his slow perusal and moved on. The circuit consisted of mostly good, hardworking people with just a few rotten eggs. Today, the latter surfaced like bad pennies, stirring memories she'd locked away for eight years.

The chutes came into view. Haley dismissed her thoughts and focused on the pens. Several bulls bawled from a communal corral, but one stood alone, housed in a corner by thick steel panels.

Resurrection.

The bull that nearly killed her two years before. Haley's heart skipped, jarring a multitude of locked-up emotions. Fear rose from her core, reaching out to suffocate her like a boa squeezing the life from its next meal. The two thousand pound black Brahma fastened his eyes on her. He lifted his powerful head and sniffed the air, tossing his shorn horns as though they weighed a pittance, as though defying her to face him again. She edged closer.

“I remember you.”

Her eyes closed briefly, trying to blot out the image of Resurrection’s muscled fury battering her into the dirt, his foul breath blowing in her face as his massive head picked her up and tossed her across the arena.

“He looks impressive.”

Haley jumped and spun around. The man towered over her like a lodgepole pine. Jet-black hair surrounded a face bronzed by wind and sun. Muscles rippled beneath the western shirt tucked neatly into a pair of Levis. Dark brown eyes scrutinized her with gentle humor and concern. Feminine appreciation stirred; then caution swamped her heart. He exuded power, and power was dangerous.

“He is,” she said, stepping back. “You riding today?”

The man shook his head. “No. But my stepbrother is.” He leaned against the rail. Resurrection snorted. “He’s been away from the circuit for a few years putting his life back together. Sure would hate to see him make a comeback on that one.”

Haley relaxed a little but kept a safe distance. She knew all about pulling her life back together. “Maybe he won’t. There are a lot of bulls to draw from. Chances are pretty slim to get this one. Besides, some of the best bullfighters in the country are in that arena to watch his back.” The man’s gaze shifted to rest on her. Haley shivered and broke eye contact.

“I hope you’re right.”

“Tell him to look fear in the eye and not let it defeat him.”

Curiosity and interest lit his eyes. “You talk like you know something about the subject.”

She did. In more ways than in the arena, but he couldn’t know. She wanted to reach out and reassure him. Fear made her keep her distance. He glanced at his watch and smiled, revealing a set of perfect white teeth. Haley’s chest squeezed.

“I’d better get back,” he said. “Thanks for talking with me.”

“You’re welcome. Tell your brother we’ll be watching out for him.” The man disappeared around the corner.

Haley looked into Resurrection’s eyes. “You won’t win. I won’t let you. I’ll see you soon.”

She forced her fear into the abyss from where it had risen. This bull was dangerous, unpredictable and as unreadable as a blank page. She would never underestimate him again.

She hurried to her camper parked beyond the grandstands, unlatched the door and flung it open. Her trailer held the July heat like a slow cooker. She opened the window and flipped the switch on the fan above the sink. The scents of popcorn, caramel and hot dogs oscillated in the breeze. Her stomach rumbled. If she hurried, she could make her costume change and still have time to see her daughter compete in the mutton busting competition.

Haley squeezed into the tiny bedroom she shared with Sarah and donned her clown outfit—ragged jeans, purple suspenders, a patched oversized shirt, and a red-and-blue wig topped with a round-rimmed polka dot hat.

Her father’s picture rested in a wooden frame beside the bed.

An identical costume covered his stocky body. His huge smile sported even white teeth surrounded by wide, painted red lips that stood out against the white face paint. A single black tear was painted near the corner of his eye.

Haley ran her finger over the glass, feeling his loss. Other pictures lined the wall. Pop holding Sarah in the hospital. Pop and Sarah blowing out birthday candles at two years and four. Then the last one—all of them together on Sarah's fifth birthday two years ago, a month before her crash with Resurrection that triggered his fatal heart attack. A soft knock outside drew her attention.

"Haley? You in there?" Hap Jenkins popped his head through the screen door.

"I'm here."

Haley set the picture aside and opened a jar of face paint, then glanced up. Her father's old sidekick leaned against the door jamb, resting his bum knee on the metal step. His gnarled hand gripped the bent aluminum frame that had seen better days.

"Sarah Rose sent me to fetch you," he said, staying in the doorway while Haley applied the face paint. "Mutton bustin'," he growled. "Kids ridin' sheep. Lot of foolishness if you ask me."

"I seem to remember you cheering me on when I was seven."

"Huh. Thought it was foolish then, too."

She met Hap's gaze in the mirror and slathered the white paint on her forehead. Would Hap and Pop have been so proud of her if they'd known the truth?

“How’d you fare in the competitions today?” Hap asked.

“I’m in the money. Top three for barrels. Should bring in a decent payback.”

“How much more you need to buy that land?”

Haley tucked her hair under the wig, rose and stepped into the sunlight with Hap, closing the trailer door behind them. “A few more rodeos’ worth. We can’t keep traipsing around the country in this portable shack forever. Besides, Sarah wants to go to a real school this year.”

She grabbed his arm and headed toward the sheep pens.

His feet shuffled in the dirt. “Resurrection’s back.”

She pulled her arm from Hap’s, hoping he hadn’t felt the tremor in her hand. “I know. I’ve seen him.”

“Ain’t too late to get someone else to take your place tonight.”

Haley slowed her pace, letting Hap catch his breath. The pain, the months of recovery came back in a rush. She concealed her fear behind a forced shrug. “I figured I’d have to face him again someday or at least another like him.”

“Ain’t another bull like Resurrection.”

She brushed her fingers across the costume fabric and felt the raised scars hidden beneath the shirt, constant reminders of her brush with death. “You blame Resurrection for Pop’s heart attack,” she murmured. “But he wasn’t responsible.”

“Mebbe not. But yer pop’s old heart couldn’t take seein’ what that critter did to you. I couldn’t take it either if...”

The sheep pens came into view. Hap’s words trailed into a

whisper. Haley stopped mid-stride and faced him, taking his rough hand in hers. He'd been like a second father to her. His feelings mattered.

"You always tell me to face what scares you most, stare it down and use it as a stepping stone." She smiled, hiding her fear under the surface. "Pop called it minimizing the monster without losing sight of the danger. No one thought I'd ever enter the arena again, Hap. But I did. I'll be fine."

"Them cowboys are depending on you to watch their backs."

"Keeping them out of the bulls' line of fire is my job. I'll do it." Haley spotted Sarah straddling the sheep pen fence and waved.

Sarah motioned them to hurry. Her gray-green eyes sparkled with excitement. "Come on. Hurry. I'm next." She spun around and headed for the chute, her black braids slapping against her shoulders.

Haley leaned against the fence, gripping the rail. Her gut twisted every time Sarah rode. A few moments later a gate opened, releasing a black-faced sheep with a jean-clad seven-year-old clinging to its back like a monkey. The animal jumped forward, hunched its back, then sprinted. Haley held her breath as Sarah held on, then slid beneath the sheep's belly. Sarah picked herself out of the dirt. A smile hid her disappointment. Haley released the rail and wiped a bead of sweat from her cheek.

"Tough break," Hap called.

Sarah unpinned the number from her shirt and ran to the fence. "That was wild. Guess I'll be too old next year to compete.

I'm going to miss it.”

Haley hugged her daughter. “You did your best. That makes you a winner.” She ruffled Sarah’s bangs and flipped a braid. “Just think of all the new stuff you’ll be eligible for next year, because you’ll be ‘old.’”

“Oh, Mom.” The disappointment left Sarah’s face.

Haley spotted Sarah’s friends pulling their father through the gate. She handed Sarah the backpack stashed beside the fence. “The girls are here. Have fun at the sleepover. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay. I love you, Mom.”

Haley gathered Sarah close. “I love you, too, Rosie girl.” She planted a kiss on Sarah’s head, leaving a streak of white face paint in the dark hair. Sarah sprinted across the arena and disappeared. “I love you more than you know.”

“She misses not having a father,” Hap said, the old unasked questions sparking his eyes.

Haley clenched her fists. “I won’t argue with you about this again, Hap. Especially not today. I’m going back to the pens.”

“I take that as you don’t want company.”

“Maybe later,” she said. “I need to concentrate on Resurrection.”

“Ya might ask God for some help in that direction,” Hap said.

“Praying never helped in the past.”

Hap’s sad smile added a few more wrinkles to his face. “Guess I still got enough prayers for us both. I’ll check on the horses and

see you later.”

He limped toward the stables. Guilt replaced Haley’s anger. Hap believed she was keeping Sarah from her father. But Hap didn’t know the truth. No one knew. Except God. And the man who’d shattered her dreams. She wasn’t faithless. She believed in God, just not in His ability to protect her or deliver the justice she felt she deserved.

The gift of Sarah didn’t erase the violence of that one night or ease her sense of lost security and fear when a man showed too much interest. The handsome features of the man she’d met earlier popped into her mind. She quickly banished it. What she wanted she would never have. God had stolen her chance for a normal life. She couldn’t rely on Him.

The truth will set you free. The phrase echoed in her mind, inviting confidences she neither asked for nor wanted. Spinning on her heels, she crossed the arena and hurried toward the bull pens. In a nearby booth, a radio played a familiar hymn. She hurried by before the music stirred memories of happier times, before the world had left its mark on her.

God could have changed the events leading to Sarah’s conception. But He hadn’t. It was she who had held the choice of life and death in her hands and had chosen life, and she would protect that life with her own, no matter what the cost. Sarah may not have been a product of love, but she was loved. And if God wouldn’t protect the innocent, she would, even if it meant forever concealing the truth of Sarah’s conception. Nothing—and no one

—would ever hurt her daughter.

Jared Sinclair placed the last chair in the circle, then glanced at his watch. The small booth allotted to the Christian Cowboy's Fellowship didn't hold more than twenty people. That hadn't been a problem so far. Volunteering usually didn't take him away from his South Dakota ranch, but this trip was an exception. His stepbrother, Mitch Jessup, had asked him to come, and Jared arranged his schedule to combine business with spending some much needed time with Mitch.

Mitch's newfound faith was forged in the fires of trials, and Jared wasn't sure it was strong enough yet to handle a comeback into the life that had contributed so much to his downfall. He had to look out for Mitch, keep him centered and on track.

As if on cue, Mitch entered with a handful of old chorus books.

"I wish they hadn't rescheduled my ride. Do you think you'll be back from your business meeting in time to watch me?"

"Hope so," Jared said. "Who'd you draw?"

Mitch's square jaw tightened. "Resurrection. Great way to make a comeback, huh?"

Jared swallowed hard. A vision rose in his mind of the massive bull he'd seen earlier. Fear for Mitch closed his throat. "Maybe you should wait on this one."

"No. I'm ready. Besides, if I win, just think of the extra money I can donate to some worthy cause. I just wish..."

Jared waited.

“I just wish I hadn’t wasted so many years.”

“They aren’t wasted if you allow God to use you with what you’ve learned,” Jared said.

He helped Mitch arrange the music, an uneasy feeling dogging each movement. He’d hated what Mitch’s hard drinking and womanizing had done not only to Mitch’s body and soul, but to Jared’s mother and Mitch’s father.

But Jared had faithfully prayed for Mitch, and when his prayer was answered, Mitch was changed so completely that there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that God did indeed answer prayer and transform lives. Still Jared sensed a hidden need—an unshared burden that weighed like a millstone around Mitch’s neck.

“You made it back from the edge, Mitch. You can make a difference.”

“What about the things I can’t take back?” Mitch’s voice filled with anguish. His gray-green eyes misted. “How do I make those right?”

Mitch’s plea gnawed at Jared’s gut. “Is there something you need to talk about?”

Mitch stared at the gravel floor. “I need to fix something, but I don’t know how.”

Mitch’s remorse was so tangible, Jared shuddered. “Sometimes you can’t fix what’s broken, Mitch,” he said. “Those are the things you have to let God fix.”

Mitch dropped his gaze. “I’ve done some awful things, Jared.

Can you find someone if...?"

Jared waited, but Mitch grew reflective. "Is there someone you want me to find?" Mitch trembled. What had Mitch done to cause such anguish in his soul? Fear tightened Jared's chest. He'd always been able to smooth things over for his stepbrother. What if this time he couldn't?

Mitch stared at the tent opening, then shook his head.

Jared sensed Mitch's frustration. "I'll reschedule my meeting and stay."

"No. Absolutely not. You go."

"You're more important to me than this meeting," Jared said.

"I know that and love you for it, bro. But I can do this on my own."

Jared hated leaving Mitch like this, but he was right. If he wasn't given a chance to test his new faith, he'd never grow. Jared picked up his jacket, then hesitated. "I'll try to wrap up my meeting fast and see you back here. You sure you'll be okay?"

Mitch nodded, then smiled, relaxing the worry lines along his mouth. "I'll be okay. Promise."

Apprehension gnawed at Jared's confidence, but he headed for the booth entrance, then turned. "One of the bull fighters I ran into gave me a piece of good advice. She said to not let fear defeat you. It's good advice, Mitch. Look it in the eye in your personal life and in the arena. And trust God for the rest."

Mitch slid into a chair and thumbed through Jared's worn Bible. "Say a prayer for me, Jared. I'm a little uneasy about

tonight.”

“You’re in God’s hands, Mitch. There’s no better place to be.”

Jared hurried out of the booth, anxious to conclude his business and return to the rodeo grounds. He was his brother’s keeper and Mitch needed him. He should be here. The breath of a prayer whispered on his lips. He lifted his gaze and instantly collided with a clown-clad whirlwind.

The impact knocked the red and blue wig to the ground, loosening a pile of blond hair held up with pins. Soft brown lashes lifted to reveal eyes almost too big for such delicate features. Her feet tottered.

“Clarabelle.” He clasped both of her arms firmly. Earlier, he’d been so wrapped up worrying about Mitch that he hadn’t appreciated the woman’s classical beauty now hidden behind clown’s makeup. Her violet eyes locked with his, stealing his breath. “We meet again. Are you all right?”

A startled gasp escaped her over-painted mouth. She pulled away and stepped back. Picking up the wig, she clutched it between her fingers. “Clarabelle?” she said.

“Seemed appropriate for a lady clown. You’re sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine. Did I hurt you?”

He took a deep breath, but his pulse continued to race. “No,” he said, offering a smile.

Haley swallowed and stepped back, frightened by the strength in his hands and warmth in his eyes.

“Maybe I should try again,” she said, hoping the bite in her voice would deter further interest.

She skirted around him and rushed off. Rounding the corner, she glanced back. He stood where she’d left him, staring after her with a puzzled, almost comical expression on his face. Haley broke contact and entered the arena through a side entrance, but the memory of his eyes stayed.

Someone touched her shoulder. She sucked in a breath and spun around, expecting to see the stranger, but Chester Rawlins, the other clown working the arena, grinned back.

“Girl, you’re jumpier than a flea on a dog,” he said.

“Nervous energy. I’ll work it off.”

“Hope so,” he said, plopping a baseball cap on his head. “Rodeo’s about to start. Let’s go.”

Tension heightened her anticipation. She reset the wig and purged the stranger from her mind. Her job began when the chute opened, not after the eight-second count.

The announcer introduced the first rider, and Haley waited. Every performance, she put her life on the line for these riders. She mustn’t fail. She moved to the side as the first bull leaped from the gate, making short work of the rider. Haley drew the animal’s attention while the cowboy dusted the dirt from his chaps and reached for his hat.

The next few hours passed in a blur. She and Chester worked the bulls like a valve and piston. She paused a moment to wipe her damp face, leaving a good portion of the face paint on the towel

tucked into her suspenders. Resurrection's name blared over the speaker.

Haley choked back a cry. Fear swirled in the arena dust, settling at her feet, gnawing at her confidence. Sitting behind the barrier protecting the spectators, Hap nodded encouragement. She reset the rubber barrel and waited.

Resurrection stood quietly in the chute, submitting to his handlers as the rider checked the rigging and centered himself, his face hidden behind his hat brim. Haley knew the minute the gate opened the whole arena would be filled with two thousand pounds of raging fury bent on unseating and maiming the man, and her as well.

The cowboy nodded. The gate opened. Resurrection shot out of the chute. Haley kept the bull in her sights. The rider tossed like a doll and but kept his balance. Resurrection bellowed, arched his back and spun around, his leg buckling as he landed.

Haley held her breath as the man tipped sideways and fought to stay upright. The seconds seemed suspended, stretching her nerves to the snapping point. Resurrection ducked his head and twisted.

The buzzer sounded. Moving in front of the crazed bull, Haley and Chester tried to draw Resurrection's attention so the cowboy could dismount, but the bull ignored them and began a series of spins. He twisted hard right, then left.

The cowboy fell over the bull's side, his gloved hand trapped in the rigging. His legs bounced between the massive hooves.

Haley's heart hammered against her chest. She reached for the rigging while Chester moved to the bull's other side. His rear hoof clipped Chester's leg. Haley caught a glimpse of two men helping him to the sidelines. She was on her own.

Resurrection's shoulder slammed into her, knocking her off balance. Her wig flew off, and her hair tumbled free. Something warm spurted onto her tongue. The familiar taste of fear rose in her throat. How had she ever thought she was a match for this animal?

Resurrection kicked sideways, catching the cowboy's leg. His bone snapped, pulling a pained scream from his lips. Haley lunged forward, caught the rigging between her fingers and pulled. The man's pain-filled eyes connected with hers. A suffocating sensation tightened her throat. Sarah's eyes.

"You," she gasped. She yanked the rigging free and released him. The force knocked her to the ground. She rose in a daze. Resurrection circled the arena, challenging all efforts to herd him toward the exit.

The cowboy looked at her with eyes full of pain, then recognition, and something else she couldn't quite define.

"I'm sorry," he screamed. "I'm sorry."

Resurrection pawed the dirt. The wild look in his eyes held Haley immobile. The noise dimmed and the world seemed to move in slow motion, sending her back to a place she didn't want to be and time she didn't want to remember.

"Get him out of there, Haley," Chester yelled.

Haley closed her eyes, reliving in a flash the two incidents that had forever changed her life. Mitch and Resurrection. Two memories converged into one arena.

Resurrection charged. Two feet from her, he pivoted, catching Mitch between his horns and tossing him into the air. Mitch landed with a thud. The bull pounded his limp body.

Haley latched on to her shredded confidence. Ignoring her pain, she grabbed Resurrection's tail and yanked hard, then darted forward and smacked his shoulder. The bull spun around, pawed the ground and charged again. Haley moved in front of Mitch. Resurrection stopped, lifted his head and grunted, then pivoted and trotted out the gate. Mitch lay where he had fallen. Silence hung over the arena.

A new anguish seared her heart. The world spun around her, as though she was viewing someone else's life from a distance and not her own. Her knees buckled. Hap rushed through the gate and caught her before she hit the ground. Her whole body shook with a force that seemed to move the earth.

"I froze, Hap. I killed him. I killed Sarah's father."

## Chapter Two

“You’re set to go,” the nurse said, taking the release form from Haley. “Take it easy, now. You’re going to be sore for a while.”

Haley slid off the exam table and touched the bandage covering her stitches. Every muscle protested. She stood up and moved toward the door. A call button blinked in the next room. “If you have any problems, don’t hesitate to come back,” the nurse said, disappearing behind the next curtain.

Little by little, warmth seeped back into Haley’s veins, bringing with it a wretchedness of mind she’d never known before. She glanced at the clock. Nearly nine-thirty. Barely an hour had passed since she’d agreed to let Hap bring her to the hospital and check her over. The emergency room was almost empty; the halls quiet, except for the steady blip of a monitor and the puff, hiss of the oxygen feed coming from a room down the hall. His room.

She had to pull herself together before facing Hap. The stitches in her forehead throbbed. Her body ached with reddening bruises. But bruises would heal. She wasn’t so sure about her spirit.

She should leave and never look back, but the room drew her like an invisible magnet. Not the room. Him. He drew her. She’d put him here. In spite of everything, she couldn’t walk away. What if he died? What if he lived? What would that mean for

Sarah? If he found out about Sarah...

Her mouth moistened with bile. She inched down the hall and stopped at the glass partition, touching the scrawled name card beside the exam room. Mitch Jessup. She'd never thought about him as a person—until now. He'd been a monster in her nightmares. A name she'd chosen to forget—until now. Fear made her step back, but an unseen hand seemed to urge her forward. She stepped into the room.

Mitch's pale face blended into the pillowcase as though he was a part of it. Several bags hung from a pole, connected to him through IV tubes. The nurse pushed medication into one, then adjusted the fluid drip and looked up.

"Must have been some wreck," she said. "Are you a relative?"

Haley's hand shook. They were related. Through Sarah. "Sort of." She looked away. "How bad is he?"

"Stable for now. He's headed for surgery. The doctor's reviewing the X-rays. He'll be back," she said.

"I'll wait if you don't mind."

"It's good that he's not alone."

The nurse checked Mitch's pulse, gave Haley's arm a pat and left. Haley edged closer. A deep gash ran along his jaw. Cuts streaked his arms, some stitched, some held together by butterfly strips. She suspected the worst injuries lay hidden beneath the sheet. His dark hair stood out against the pillow. Sunken cheeks gave his face a death-like appearance. Except for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, he looked like a corpse, nothing like the

man she'd met at the carnival that hot July night eight years ago.

She'd lied to Pop about where she was going, knowing full well he would refuse to let her go. She'd seen the tall, handsome cowboy the moment she'd entered the gate—felt his eyes roam over her. He had a strong square jaw with full, high cheekbones, crisp dark hair that curled around his neck and a dazzling smile that made her heart skip.

He was older, worldly and smooth, and just a tad drunk. But not so drunk that he hadn't known what he was doing. He was all the forbidden things she'd been told to stay away from and everything that enticed an innocent teen full of curiosity and whimsical dreams.

"I'm Haley," she'd offered.

His grin had turned her knees to Jell-O. "Hello, Haley." He bowed. "Mitch Jessup, at your service. But you can call me Lancelot. Seems my Guinevere has stood me up."

"I'll be Gwen," she'd murmured.

He'd touched her arm. "I'd like that. Wanna ride the carousel with me?" He'd leaned toward her, his lips only inches from hers. The flirtation seemed so trivial then. Not so, now.

The monitor blipped again. Haley jumped, stepped back, then moved closer to the bed, blocking her thoughts, holding the past behind the barrier that had preserved her for so long.

She wanted him to suffer, not die. If he died, it would be on her head, one more guilt to add to her list of sins. A sob escaped her lips. She closed her eyes and squeezed her head between her

hands, unwilling to face him, unable to turn away.

“Haley,” Mitch whispered. “It is you.”

She opened her eyes and backed toward the door. Reason told her he couldn't hurt her. He was too busted up. But fear didn't know reason. He lifted his arm and groaned.

“Don't go.”

Haley's legs shook, but she stopped inching toward the door. “I've hated you for so long.” Her gaze drifted over him, avoiding his eyes. “I never wanted this.”

His eyes glazed with pain. “I know. Not your fault. None of it....”

Tears welled in her eyes. “You took everything,” she said. “My trust, my innocence. All you left in me was shame and fear.”

His eyes closed. “I'm sorry.”

“Sorry...isn't...enough. I want you to hurt, like you've hurt me.”

His head moved back and forth as though her words haunted him. “If I could...change that night...God knows.”

Haley clenched her teeth. “Don't you dare drop the God bomb on me.”

Mitch's attempted smile ended in a grimace. “Felt that way once or twice.” His body spasmed. He caught his breath. “God can heal this. Heal us.”

“Us...?” She shrank from the word, from his pleading eyes. “I'll never forgive you for what you did.”

“No.” He looked incredibly tired. “Forgive yourself.” He

gasped and looked straight through her. “Give God the hurt. Only way past it.” He gasped, then closed his gray-green eyes.

Sarah’s eyes.

Haley’s breath caught. Whatever else Mitch Jessup was, he was Sarah’s father. Something inside her knotted like tangled rope.

Mitch’s lips quivered. “Don’t let what I did...keep you in darkness.”

His chin dipped a tad, rose as though he were struggling to remain awake, then his head rolled sideways. Haley took a step forward and stopped.

Don’t you dare die.

For a brief moment his chest stilled, then moved. She released her breath with the movement. Sorry wasn’t enough to make up for what he’d destroyed. Mitch Jessup planted her child with violence. She wanted him to pay, not die.

Don’t live in darkness. Let God have it.

Anger burned through her. God had abandoned her behind a vacant booth that night, holding a basket full of destroyed dreams. God had left her nurturing a life she hadn’t asked for and wouldn’t destroy.

The wounds God had allowed denied her all that she dreamed of, leaving her fearful of intimacy, unable to shed the shackles of the past, unable to give Sarah or herself the kind of life they wanted.

And now God had allowed this man back into her life. To

what purpose? If God had forgiven Mitch Jessup after what he'd done, she wanted no part of God. There was no way she could ever forgive Mitch.

"Forgive me," he pleaded.

She shook her head. "I can't."

"I'm sorry." Anguish rang in his whispered words.

Haley hardened her heart. "It isn't enough."

She pivoted and rushed down the hall, away from his pleading eyes and wasting body. Someone called to her, but she didn't answer. She shoved the emergency door open and gulped in a cleansing breath, but the tepid air couldn't erase the smell of death any more than the night's darkness could hide what her mind held.

Hap's battered truck waited by the curb, empty. She yanked the door open and slid inside, resting her head against the worn upholstery. A few minutes later, he slid into the seat beside her.

"Somebody light yer tail on fire?" he said softly.

Haley jerked upright. Pain shot through her neck and sides. She wanted to leave this place and all of its memories behind and never look back. But now and forever, they would follow. Sarah was all that mattered. She must protect Sarah.

"Where were you?" she asked.

Hap handed her a steaming cup of coffee. "Looking for you. Didn't you hear me call to you? Ya scared that nice nurse right outta her shoes takin' off like that."

Haley took a big gulp, scalding her tongue, welcoming the

pain that drew her back from the past. “I didn’t see her.”

Hap slanted a look her way and started the engine. His gray eyes filled with sympathy. “Saw the doc. He said you’re going to be sore but okay. Not so sure about the other fella.” Hap pulled out of the parking lot. “Thought about what you plan to tell Sarah?”

Haley glanced back at the hospital entrance. “That I’m battered but okay.”

Hap eased into a turn with the same quiet manner he did everything. Even in the darkness, she could almost picture the well-oiled wheels in his mind rewinding the video, viewing and analyzing each event in detail. A street light illuminated his face. He glanced her way. In a flash she saw his hurt, not for himself, but for her and Sarah. Tears stung her eyes.

“You don’t have to shade the facts no more. Your Pop ain’t here for you to protect, Haley. Even if he was, he’d understand. Do you plan to tell Sarah the truth about her father?” he asked without reproof or absolution.

“The truth, Hap? What is the truth?”

He turned the truck again, bringing the fair-grounds into view. “Wasn’t sure until I saw you leaving that young man’s room. Things never did set right with your story. Didn’t happen the way you said, did it?” He reached a hand out and patted her arm. “What do you plan to do about it?”

His face turned toward her, his compassion covered by darkness. Haley’s pulse hammered against her throat.

“Nothing. I can’t, Hap. And for Sarah’s sake, you won’t either.”

Jared raced into Mitch’s room as the nurse injected something into Mitch’s IV and unlocked the bed wheels. Tubes and needles poked from Mitch’s body. Jared slid to a stop, too stunned to move.

“Jared?” the nurse asked, rolling Mitch’s bed toward the elevator.

“Yes.”

“He’s been asking for you. You can go part of the way to surgery with us.”

“How bad?” Jared said.

The nurse poked the elevator button, but didn’t look up. “I’ve seen worse,” she said, checking the IV flow.

Jared took Mitch’s hand and felt a weak squeeze. “I’m here, Mitch. I understand you rode Resurrection.”

“Yeah.” Mitch’s voice faded. “Rode him. Bull still won. You should’ve seen it.”

“Guess that means you’ll have to retire for a while on your winnings until you get better.”

Mitch’s hand went slack. Jared held on as the elevator ascended to the second floor.

“Won’t get...better. Your meeting...” Mitch whispered.

“Went well,” Jared said, shutting out the fear gnawing at his throat. “I should have been here.”

Mitch's heavy lids opened, revealing eyes that seemed to see into another dimension. "We didn't know my ride would be rescheduled. God did. As it should be..." His voice faded. "Where is she?"

Jared glanced at the nurse. "Who?"

Mitch gulped in a breath. "Haley. She was here."

"There was a young woman here earlier but I think she left," the nurse explained. "She said she was family."

"Who's Haley, Mitch?" Jared asked.

Mitch struggled to stay awake. "I... Don't let her go..." He swallowed. "I...need to forgive..."

The words slurred together, not making sense. Jared bent closer. The connection with Mitch faded.

"You hang on, Mitch." Jared gripped the bed rail. "You hear me? Hang on. I need you."

"Promise," Mitch said.

"Anything. What?"

Mitch's fingers circled Jared's hand. "Haley gets the money." His eyes closed. "I'm so sorry. So sorry."

The elevator doors opened. A male attendant scrambled in to assist the nurse. Jared trotted to keep up as they pulled the gurney toward the surgery's double doors.

"Wait here," the attendant said. "Someone will check in with you later."

Jared's heart pounded against his chest.

Mitch's lips parted. "It's okay. I'm ready to go. Remember..."

promise.”

Jared’s gut clamped. “I’ll remember, Mitch. But you’re going to be all right.”

The doors banged shut, cutting off Jared’s words. He winced and stared through the glass until Mitch disappeared behind another set of doors. The hall was quiet, dark and empty. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and headed back to the waiting room.

Memories burned his mind—high school rodeos, football games, prom. Their parents had married when Jared was in the fifth grade and Mitch a year behind. Every important event in their lives had been shared. He raked a hand through his hair and glanced around the room. Empty paper cups and wadded tissues lay scattered in the waiting room, remnants from the last occupants. A hardback Bible sat isolated on a table.

Jared sank into the chair and ran his fingers over the gold lettering. For eight years Mitch had been out of his reach. He’d searched and prayed, desperate to keep Mitch out of trouble, but Jared hadn’t been able to protect him. He couldn’t protect him now. He squeezed the Bible between his hands. He couldn’t lose his brother. Mitch had to live.

Jared bowed his head. Please, God, don’t let Mitch die.

He passed the hours pleading to God on Mitch’s behalf. Then the hospital paging system crackled.

“Code blue.”

## Chapter Three

Six days later, Jared parked behind the Fellowship Booth and headed down the midway. The memory of Walt Jessup's crumpled form at Mitch's gravesite was too raw to revisit. He'd do anything to ease his stepfather's pain. Focusing on the truth about Mitch's accident was a welcome diversion. He'd reviewed the playback tapes and asked Sam McIntosh, the association president, for an investigation, hoping what he believed he'd seen on the tapes was wrong. He paused beside an empty booth and watched the milling people.

"Clarabelle," he murmured to himself. The violet-eyed clown he'd spoken to the day Mitch died formed clearly in his mind. Clarabelle and Mitch's Haley were one and the same. An odd feeling of disappointment punched his gut. "Who are you?" he whispered. "And why would Mitch leave you his winnings without telling his family anything about you?"

He shut out the loud music and joined the flow of people. He'd frozen the replay tape from the moment where it seemed Mitch had recognized Haley, then played the rest in slow motion, right up to the moment Mitch lay still in the dirt. The more he watched the replay, the more he felt the tangible connection between the bullfighter and his brother. It was as though for a split second, the screen had come alive.

Something wasn't right. When he'd seen Haley near the bull

pens, she'd spoken of facing fear. He'd seen her fear on the replay. Had her fear caused Mitch's death? If so, he couldn't let it go. Mitch deserved justice. Jared needed answers, and he was certain Haley had them.

He pictured her face again. His fingers and nose tingled as he remembered her soft skin beneath his steady grasp and the fresh scent of the soap lingering on her flesh. He tensed, the memory surprising him.

The midway sparkled in the afternoon sun. Laughter and music filled the air. The sun half-hid behind a cluster of clouds, forming a halo of bright light with descending rays that seemed to touch the earth—almost as though the heavens rejoiced in catching Mitch's spirit and carrying it up to God.

God, Mitch made his peace with You. Help me make peace with his death.

He waited for God's peace to ease the pain. But nothing came. Only an emptiness left by Mitch's passing and lots of unanswered questions. The arena speaker hummed, announcing the line-up for barrel competitions. He shifted direction and weaved through the crowd toward the horse corrals. The announcer's voice echoed between the stands.

"Next up, in third place, a circuit favorite, Haley Clayton, on Spinner..."

Jared drew a sharp breath and edged along the fence toward the gate. A dun horse shot through the opening. The woman's face passed in a blur. Horse and rider moved in unison, cleared

the first barrel and raced toward the second.

Jared glanced at the clock as the pair formed a cloverleaf around the second barrel. The big gelding tightened the circle around the third, but the woman's toe clipped the barrel edge, tipping it into the dirt. That mistake would knock her out of the big money. She ducked her head, leaned low across the horse's back and raced for the gate.

Jared slipped around the steel panel into the paddock area. If Mitch's death had affected her performance, it certainly hadn't pricked her enough to attend his funeral or send condolences.

Haley dismounted and stood beside the fence, her slender shoulders stooped in disappointment while her fingers stroked the white star on the gelding's forehead. A long braid hung down her back. The gold-fringe on her red shirt matched her hair. A narrow, silver-studded belt emphasized her small waist.

"Haley," he said, stopping behind her.

She turned and tipped her hat back. A pair of vivid violet eyes rounded with recognition. Her left eyebrow lifted a fraction. A tremor touched her smooth lips. Her skin glowed with a beauty previously hidden behind clown makeup. A yellowing bruise discolored her cheek. Bangs partially concealed a flesh-colored bandage on her forehead. She half-turned and flipped the stirrup over the horse's back, then loosened the latigo holding the cinch in place.

"We meet again," he said.

A shadow passed over her face and quickly disappeared. "Are

you following me?" she asked.

"No," he said, moving toward the horse's head. "I'm Jared Sinclair, Mitch Jessup's brother."

Her eyes flattened and went cold. Her fingers curled around the buckle like a lifeline. She stepped back, catching her spurs in the dirt. Jared reached for her elbow but she pulled away. "I'd like to talk to you about what happened the night Mitch died."

She focused her gaze on his boots. "I'm sorry your brother died, but I don't see how going over it will help you. It won't change what happened."

"Maybe not. But I still need to hear it from someone who was close to him."

"We weren't close." Haley lifted her head, her beautiful eyes focusing on his chin. Wariness darkened them, turning them almost purple.

"I meant close by," Jared said. Suspicion nudged his mind.

"Lots of people were there. Why don't you talk to them?"

Mitch's voice rang through Jared's mind. Don't let her go... forgive.

"I want to talk to you. Mitch asked me to find you," Jared said. If Haley was responsible for Mitch's death, there was no way he was going to just let her walk away from it like nothing had happened. "I'd like to know why," he said.

Her face paled. "I can't imagine why."

"I think you do."

She caught her breath, then shifted the reins back and forth

in her hands.

Jared felt her fear, sensed deception at work, but if he wanted answers, truthful answers, he'd have to use softer tactics. "Please, Haley. I just need to know what happened to my brother."

Doubt flickered across her face. She dropped her gaze. "I can tell you what I remember. Everything happened so fast, some details are jumbled," she murmured.

She seemed to choose her words carefully. Jared moved to the horse's side, forcing her to look right at him.

"Try. I want to know everything that happened between the time Mitch entered the arena and the time he was carried out. And I want to hear it from you."

Her gaze shifted toward the exit. She buried her fingers in the gelding's mane and combed through the thick hairs. For someone who had nothing to hide, she was acting guilty about something. Disappointment centered in Jared's chest. The sights and sounds dimmed until it seemed the only ones occupying this space were he and Haley—and the mystery surrounding her and Mitch.

"There isn't much to tell," she said. "His ride was normal until the dismount. His hand got caught in the rigging. I pulled it free and we got knocked in the dirt. The impact shook us both." She fidgeted, letting silence fall between them. Her voice caught, then lowered. "Resurrection got to him before I did."

There was more in what she didn't say, in the way her eyes refused to meet his, the way her voice trembled with something more than just sorrow or regret. Mitch deserved to be heard

and Jared intended to see this through, no matter how painful it proved to be.

“You knew this bull,” he said. “You knew how dangerous he was. That’s why you were at the pens that day.”

She nodded. Her gaze swept the ground, then glazed as though her thoughts had taken a different direction. “I knew him. He’s dangerous.” She murmured so low he barely heard and was uncertain if she was referring to Mitch or the bull.

“You knew Mitch, too, didn’t you, Haley?”

Her head snapped up. “No.”

“You were with him at the hospital.”

“I was there anyway.” She touched the bandage on her forehead.

“Why didn’t you stay?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why?” he probed.

“I just couldn’t. Why should I?”

“Did he say anything to you?”

Haley flinched. Fear widened her eyes, touching him in a way that made him regret his harshness but heightened his need for the truth.

The question snaked between them like a whip and struck her. She remembered only too well Mitch’s last words. Words that still echoed in her head.

Forgive yourself.

How dare he tell her to forgive herself after what he’d done.

She shook the memory loose.

“I think maybe he thought I was someone else.”

“He didn’t. He was very certain about your name and about wanting me to find you.” Jared’s brown eyes probed hers.

“I have to go,” she said. “If you’re looking to blame someone, I can’t help you. I did what I could and I’m truly sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry that he died or that your moment of fear may have caused his death?”

Jared’s square jaw clenched, giving his rugged face a determined, hard look. Haley’s stomach roiled. He was too close to the truth for comfort. If he found out about Sarah, what would happen then? Panic rose to her throat. He emitted the same power she’d sensed the first time she’d run into him outside the bull pens six days ago. How much like Mitch was Jared? Don’t make an enemy of this man, she cautioned herself.

She finished loosening the cinch, aware that he watched, gauged and absorbed every move. The sun dipped toward the distant mountains. Haley shivered in spite of the heat. She mustn’t give him cause to pursue his questions.

Jared’s glance sharpened. “How well did you know my brother, Haley?”

She lifted her chin, forcing herself to stare into his eyes. She would not cower before this man or any other. And she wouldn’t own Mitch’s sins. Heaven knew she had enough of her own to atone for.

“I told you I didn’t know him. We met briefly several years

ago. I didn't see him again until the night he rode Resurrection."

"But you had met him before so why did you deny it? You told the nurse at the hospital you were family."

"Meeting doesn't constitute knowing. I was in that arena with him. Two years ago I was laying in the same spot that he was. I needed to know and the doctors wouldn't tell me anything." She shrugged.

"Then why not just say so?" Silence hung between them like dust in an arena.

Her heart dropped. Caught in the deception. She glanced at her watch and moved around Spinner. "I don't know.

"I watched the replays."

Her fist clenched in the animal's mane. "Is there a point to all this? You weren't in there. You don't know. I have to go."

Jared stepped aside. His hand, large and rough, touched her wrist. She shivered again.

"Don't go far, Haley," he said. "There's more to this than what you've told me. I can find truth in the most unlikely places. You and I are not through."

Haley tugged on Spinner's reins and rushed from the paddock without looking back. Jared had her so confused she didn't know which way was up. Behind the barns, she bent over, rested her hands on her knees, and gulped in waves of fresh air, but it didn't stem the nausea rising to her throat. Spinner nuzzled her neck and nickered.

She led the horse into the barn. When she chanced a look

behind her there was no sign of Jared, but she could still feel his power, the air of authority surrounding him, the tingle along her skin that remained long after she'd pulled away from him.

He'd thrown down an invisible gauntlet, and instinct told her he would stop at nothing to discover the truth.

The sun dropped behind the horizon, painting the sky a dark orange. Hap plugged the horse trailer lights into his truck and rechecked the hitch and safety chains, while Haley hooked the camper to her truck.

"Never known you to run from nothing," he said.

Haley placed a finger to her lips and watched Sarah stuff a horse blanket into Hap's truck cab. If she and Sarah could get safely back to Hap's place, Jared would have a hard time finding them.

"There's no reason to stay when there's work waiting at home."

"It's not fair," Sarah said, sticking her lips out. "Why don't you go? Hap and I can come later. After the finals. We never miss the finals."

"We'll go together," Haley said.

Sarah's eyes watered in frustration. "Can I go and at least say goodbye to my friends?"

Haley's heart thudded like a trapped rabbit. "Go. But stay in sight of the truck. I don't want to have to come looking for you. You've got ten minutes."

Hap's silent disapproval cut into the evening air louder than

the music coming from the midway. She never should have told him everything.

“Runnin’ stinks, don’t it?” he said.

Haley moved toward her own truck, which seemed to groan beneath the weight of the camper. “I’m protecting Sarah.”

“He’s her family, too.”

“How do I know he’s any different than Mitch?”

“You don’t.”

Haley locked the camper door and leaned her head against the cool metal. “Don’t, Hap. Don’t take his side. What if he finds out about Sarah?”

Hap patted her arm, then squeezed her shoulder.

“Sarah’s mine. She can’t know where she came from. She’s too young.” Haley turned and leaned against him.

“You didn’t do nothin’ wrong, girl. You can’t run from this.”

Haley’s eyes misted. “Sarah doesn’t need any family but you and me.”

“Maybe God thinks otherwise.”

“Don’t,” she said.

Hap’s rough hand stroked her hair. “Ain’t you forgettin’? Sarah’s God’s child. There’s a reason He placed her with you—a reason He allowed her to come into this world the way she did. And there’s a reason this man is here now.”

Haley spun around, grabbed the camper jack and rammed it into the truck bed. “Well, I wish God would enlighten me.”

“Maybe you ain’t listenin’. Wouldn’t be the first time,” he said.

Haley jammed her hat onto her head. "I suppose you're going to tell me too that God had a reason for Mitch being here and a reason that I...played a part in killing him." She brushed away a tear.

"You didn't kill nobody."

"If it had been any other cowboy..."

"What's written is written, honey. And God holds the pen that does the writin'."

She kicked a rock and sent it flying across the parking lot. "I don't want him poking around."

Hap stroked his chin. "Secrets won't stay hidden forever."

Haley caught Sarah's glance, the rebellious look still in her eyes.

Hap motioned Sarah to wait. "Face the man now. Don't wait for him to come to you."

"Tell him what his brother was and seal our fate? Not a chance."

Hap raked a hand through his silver hair and sighed. "Stay and finish this. I'll take Sarah home with me and you won't need to mention her at all."

Haley rubbed her arms, feeling a chill in the warm air.

"You need to make him see that you are sorry the boy died." Hap pinned her with his gaze. "You are sorry, aren't you?"

"You know I am."

"He needs to that." Hap tipped his hat back.

"I do feel responsible, Hap. Responsible and...relieved. It was

an accident, but with Mitch gone, I thought that now it was finally over. I could put an end to all those bad dreams. What does that say about me?"

"That you're human and that you can't do this alone." Hap scuffed his toe in the dust. "Haley, you gotta let God help with this."

Haley glanced at Sarah and swallowed the knot in her throat. Hap could very well be right. But trusting didn't come easy. Especially where God was concerned. She wasn't sure it ever would. "I can't. But I will stay. I'll finish this."

Hap gave a satisfied nod and loaded the horses in his trailer. "I'll get the rest of the stuff from the barn," he said.

The memory of Jared's dark eyes filled her mind, how their warmth the day he'd bumped in to her outside the Fellowship tent had both touched and frightened her, how they'd gleamed like hard shards of rock when he'd questioned her about the accident and knowing Mitch.

She'd backed herself into a corner, and he knew it. If he pushed her too far, he wouldn't like what she had to say. She rechecked the hitch and chains on the camper and fished in her pocket for the keys. Footsteps crunched the gravel behind her.

"I'm almost ready, Hap."

She turned around and stared straight into Jared's flashing dark eyes.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

She searched frantically for Hap, then saw Sarah wave to her

friends and skip toward her.

## Chapter Four

Jared watched the child approach. Her movements smacked with familiarity, rekindling old memories of another time and place, memories of a young boy with unruly jet-black hair tagging along behind him with the same bounce in his step and tilt to his head. The puzzle pieces were starting to come together. The first shock wave knocked him like a mule's kick.

Every movement right down to her furrowed brow bore traces of the brother he'd lost. Her black hair refused to be tamed by braids and streamed in a tangled mass around her face. She lifted her chin and darted a look at him. Another shock wave ripped through Jared, pain so intense it stole his breath.

"Hi. I'm Sarah," she said holding his gaze with gray-green eyes.

Jared opened his mouth but nothing came out. This child was a feminine replica of Mitch. She had to be Mitch's daughter. Obviously Haley hadn't expected to see Mitch again. That was the reason he'd seen recognition and shock on the replay tapes, the reason her answers were less than satisfactory. Sarah was the secret Haley was hiding, the secret that may have cost Mitch his life.

The color drained from Haley's face. Like a bear protecting her young, she moved between him and Sarah. "Sarah Rose. Go to the barn and find Hap," she said.

“But, Mom—”

“Go. Now.”

Sarah bounced an uncertain look between them and raced toward the barn. Jared watched until she was out of sight. He wanted to reach out and touch her, make sure she was real. She was so like Mitch it made him ache. Haley had kept Sarah from Mitch, from Walt, from all of them. Why? Anger waged a tug of war inside him.

“She’s Mitch’s daughter, isn’t she, Haley? Did he know?” The question nearly choked him. “What really happened in the arena the night Mitch died?”

He heard the steel in his own voice. She winced, then grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the truck, away from the barns and from Sarah. “She’s my daughter. Go away. You have no right to hound me.”

“Mitch’s death gives me that right,” he said looking toward the barn. Jared shook with rage. Only God would be able to help her if he was right. “Look me in the eye and tell me that child isn’t his and that you didn’t deliberately keep her from him. From her grandparents.”

She couldn’t. She knew it and so did he. “Sarah has a right to know her family,” he said. “We just lost Mitch, and Sarah is a living part of him. We have a right to know her.” His chest tightened. He fisted his hands against his sides.

Haley flattened herself against the truck. “You have no rights and neither did Mitch. He lost that the second he left me behind

that—”

She covered her mouth with her hand. She wouldn't—couldn't—think about that night or speak of it ever. Not with this man or any other. The fury in Jared's eyes terrified her. The realization of what he wanted, expected, was unthinkable.

She looked toward the barn and saw Sarah pulling Hap toward them, his bum leg sliding in the dirt, kicking dust into the evening air. “I can't talk to you about this now.”

He followed her gaze. His eyes narrowed when they rested on Sarah, then softened. For a moment she thought he would refuse, that he would lie in wait, snatch Sarah away and disappear. A hand clenched around her soul.

“When?” he said.

“Tomorrow. I'll meet you at the bull pens in the morning.”

His gaze shifted back to her and hardened. “Be there, Haley. If you run, I'll find you.”

He spun around without looking back and disappeared into the crowd, his threat hanging in the air like heavy fog. Haley's whole body shook. She gripped the truck and gulped in a breath, felt Hap and Sarah's presence behind her, then Hap's hand touched her shoulder and Sarah's small fingers closed around hers.

“Mom? Are you okay? Who was that man?”

The endless night finally broke, sending a streak of red across the horizon. Haley headed toward the bull pens taking comfort

in the familiar surroundings. Meeting Jared felt safer with Hap and Sarah out of Wyoming and back in Colorado, even if she hadn't answered Sarah's questions to satisfaction. One more strike against Jared Sinclair.

The sounds and smells around the stock pens rose in the morning air. Haley slowed her step, then stopped. Jared stood in front of Resurrection's pen, his profile outlined beneath a wide-brimmed hat. His arms were draped over the top rail, his eyes locked on the bull. She wondered if he, too, had been avoiding Resurrection's pen. Even from a distance, she saw his chin tighten, then his hand brushed over his face.

Her heart squeezed. He was an enemy, a threat to herself and Sarah. She couldn't see him as a man grieving a loss, but she couldn't ignore it either.

"I'm here," she said.

Jared lifted his head, turned and faced her. Shadows lingered beneath his eyes. He hadn't shaved and the stubble darkening his face made him forbidding. She took a backward step.

"I should have been here," Jared said.

His pain mingled with her own. Haley ignored the warning buzzing in her head. "It wouldn't have mattered," she said. "There are no rules with Resurrection. You couldn't have stopped what happened." She hesitated a moment, then added, "Neither could I."

"We'll never know for certain," he said pulling his jacket collar up. "But that's not why we're here, is it? You see, Haley, it's not

the beginning or the end that matters most now. It's the space in between."

The space that included Sarah. The beginning did matter, to her, but he loved his brother. Sympathy vanished in a rush of white-hot anger. "Don't presume you know me or anything about me."

His gaze traveled her face, then locked on her eyes. Haley wished she could crawl inside his head and know what he was thinking. This guessing was like falling off a cliff in slow motion.

"That's the whole point. None of us really know anything, do we? I'll make this clear and direct. Sarah has a grandfather who feels he's lost everything. The truth is, he hasn't." Tense silence stretched between them. "Mitch isn't here to speak for himself, so I'll do it for him. He deserves justice for what you kept from him. I want you and Sarah to come to South Dakota to meet..."

Haley gasped, certain Resurrection had gut kicked her, but the animal stood quietly, his nose buried in a mound of alfalfa. Her legs threatened to buckle. She shook her head.

Jared lifted a brow. "Is that a no?" he said in a harsh, raw voice.

She looked up, forcing herself to meet his gaze without flinching. "That's a never."

"Mitch made bad choices for a lot of years," Jared said. "In the last few months, he'd turned his life around. He was pulling things together. Trying to right the wrongs."

"And for that he deserves...what?"

His eyes flashed. Haley moved to the corral and stared at

Resurrection. Jared moved beside her. “After I left you last night, I thought a lot about everything that’s happened. Mitch walked away from you and Sarah. Away from his responsibilities. I get that. I think I understand some things that I didn’t before.”

Haley’s hand fisted. “You understand nothing!” She raised her fist to strike him. He caught her hand, his grip around her wrist powerful and painful. She trembled but stared him down.

If he wanted the truth, she could stomp him into the dust with it. But she couldn’t revisit a place that had taken her years to get past. His grip tightened. She struggled, kicking at his legs.

“Haley. Stop it.”

He released her. She stepped back. Several people were staring at them. She turned away and gripped the corral panels with shaking hands. The wound that had never really healed ripped open.

“Sometimes people aren’t what you think they are,” she said. “Sometimes by the time you figure that out, the chute’s already opened and it’s too late to change the ride. Don’t do this.” He didn’t touch her again, but she felt his hold, like a noose around her neck.

“This isn’t negotiable, Haley. You can tell your daughter about her father or leave it to a court. Bottom line is she has more family than just you.” He pulled a pen and paper from his pocket and jotted down a number. “It’s time to make things right,” he said, his tone softening. “If I don’t hear from you in three days, I’ll come to Colorado and get you.”

Haley's throat closed. "You wouldn't."

Jared took her hand and crammed the paper into her palm. "Three days. Call me."

Four hours later Haley pulled into the gravel lane leading to Hap's ranch. She backed the truck and camper under the old pole barn, shut off the engine and leaned back. Gray weathered boards with peeling white paint covered the old house. The out-buildings were ancient and in need of repair, but it was home. The only real home she'd ever known. Her throat tightened. She opened the door and slid from the seat. Across the barnyard, a door slammed. Gravel crunched beneath running feet. Sarah slid to a stop beside the truck, then threw her arms around Haley's waist.

"You're back. I'm sorry I was mad at you last night. Hap said you had to take care of a grown-up thing."

Haley looked into Sarah's gray-green eyes. The innocence and resiliency of her own childhood seemed like a distant memory but one she needed to preserve in Sarah.

How much she had lost. But how much she had gained.

"Hap's in the barn. Annie had her puppies last night. He said he needed to talk to you as soon as you got home."

"Then I'll go see him."

Sarah headed for the house. Haley crossed the barnyard and pulled the barn door open. Bales of fresh hay filled the usually musty barn with a fresh, clean scent.

Hap rose, lifting two squirmy mounds of black and white in his gnarled hands. “Born last night, just after we got home,” he said. “Nice pups. Should bring a good price.” He set the pups down and avoided looking at her. “Sam McIntosh called.”

Air whooshed from Haley’s lungs. “Sam?” She managed to choke out the association president’s name. “What did he want?”

“Seems someone has requested an inquiry into Mitch’s accident. Sam thought you should know.”

Someone. Jared.

Haley’s legs wobbled. She slid onto a bale and stared at the ground.

“You’re on leave until the official inquiry is closed,” Hap said quietly.

Suspended. Her livelihood and hard-earned reputation hung in the balance, dangling from a hangman’s noose. And she knew who held the rope.

“Sam said it’s just a formality and he was sure the ruling would be in your favor. Guess I don’t need to ask how your meeting with Sinclair went.”

Three days passed like a year. Every day Haley watched the road, waiting for Jared to make good on his promise. He was never far from her thoughts, and she hated the way he’d taken root in her mind, and stolen her sense of security and peace. She sent Sarah into town with Hap, knowing full well it would incur Jared’s anger if he arrived and she wasn’t there, but if he thought

she would lie down and play dead so he could issue ultimatums and walk all over her, he could think again.

She drew Annie's pup close to her face, relishing the softness of newborn puppy. Tiny claws flailed against her cheek. The black nose scrunched, then a wet tongue latched around her nose and suckled. The scent of puppy breath lingered on her skin, fresh and new, helpless and innocent. Innocent. The word seemed to taunt her.

Mourning doves cooed in the barn rafters. Haley lifted her head and watched the sun slant through the weathered boards. This place had once been her refuge. As a child she used to come here and pour her heart out to God, just as Sarah sometimes did now. She had faith then. It all seemed like another lifetime. If she sought God's help again, would He hear or turn a deaf ear to her plea like that night so long ago?

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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