

Bryce Barrett clamped his Stetson on his head and urged Shadow, his mare, into a gallop, guiding her into an intercept course with a recalcitrant steer. As if Shadow needed guidance. She saw the animal making a run for it and was in pursuit almost before Bryce told her what to do. He watched as the young animal raced across the pasture, as if chased by an invisible demon. He gave thanks that whatever had spooked the steer hadn't upset the rest of the herd.

*Damn.* It was headed right for the fence. Bryce spurred Shadow on, but the steer had too much of a head start and ran blindly into the barbed wire. One leg was caught, which only served to spook it even more.

Bryce and Shadow came to a halt a few feet away. Behind him, Bryce sensed one of his fellow cowhands. A quick glance told him it was Frank Wembly, who'd been covering the other side of the herd. Bryce dismounted and approached the entangled cow. "Easy fella. Moving around's only going to make it worse."

"Need some help?" Frank asked.

"Cutters," Bryce said.

"Comin' right up."

While Bryce waited for Frank, he pressed his hands on the animal's heaving chest. "It's okay, little guy. We'll get you out of there."

The steer seemed to understand Bryce was there to help, and its struggling lessened.

Frank reached in, cut the wire, and extricated the animal. "Doesn't look too bad," he said. "You calmed him down before he did any serious damage. They should call you the cow whisperer. Or just plain animal whisperer. Don't know how you do it, but I'm glad it works. Probably saved either putting the animal down or some horrendous vet bill. D-Man will like that."

Bryce shrugged it off. The steer scrambled to its feet and took off for the herd. "I'll let him know." Without another word, Bryce mounted up and called his boss, Derek Cooper, owner of the Triple-D Ranch.

"More scared than hurt," Bryce said.

"I'm still bogged down in paperwork. Cecily and Grady should be here in time for lunch. Head back so you can meet them if they get here before I'm done. It's almost lunchtime."

"You sure you don't need me out here?" Bryce knew he was postponing the inevitable, and wasn't surprised when Derek told him no.

Bryce clucked his tongue, and Shadow took off at an easy lope. "You're thinking you'll get some lunch too, aren't you? Maybe *you* can greet the new kid."

Twenty minutes later, Bryce rested a foot on the lower fence rail of the paddock and whistled. Ginger, Cecily's aged mare, moseyed over looking for a handout and Bryce gave her a chunk of carrot. As she munched, she moved closer and lowered her head. He scratched her poll, right between the ears. "You like that, don't you girl? You behave yourself and Cecily might come by and take you for a walk."

Or not. She'd probably be too busy with the new kid. Bryce's gut clenched. For a while, he'd thought they might have something more serious going, but she was so engrossed in helping people—people who couldn't be trusted, people who would end up yanking her shiny bright world out from under her fancy boots—that they had nothing left to talk about except how Ginger was doing.

Damn Derek for not being able to resist his sister's requests. Demands, more like it, but Derek never saw it that way. She'd give him her brown-eyed puppy-dog look, and he'd melt. Nothing Bryce said—to either of them—could change her mind. Derek had caved. Easy for him—because guess who Derek said had to ride herd on this punk? Good old Bryce, that's who. He and Lemuel, the last stray Cecily had sent to the Triple-D, had gotten along, so Derek and his sister assumed Bryce would respond to everyone the same way.

He kicked a clod of dirt. No. Didn't work that way. Lemuel had that one in a million gift of animal connection. Animals didn't have secrets. They didn't have agendas. Not like people. With an animal, you needed to know how to read them, and Lemuel could.

High-pitched sounds of the old triangle clanging from the back porch signaled lunch was ready. Bryce gave Ginger one more scratch before hustling for the ranch house. He stopped in the mud room to take off his boots, placed his Stetson on the shelf, and washed up at the sink as Frank and Tim arrived and joined in the routine. Charlie, Derek's little-bit-of-everything mutt, stopped at Bryce's feet for a scratch before trotting into the kitchen.

"You meet the new kid?" Frank asked.

Bryce shook his head. "Not here yet."

"You think you can teach him to help with the livestock, or you gonna have him hauling hay and pitching manure?" Tim said.

"I don't know who he is. Street kid was all Cecily said. If he thinks he's getting an all-expenses-paid trip to a classy dude ranch, he's in for an eye-opener. I know there has to be some horse connection to fit the rules of the program. Beyond that, there's plenty we can come up with to keep him busy."

"You must be pissed," Tim said with a chuckle. "Haven't heard you string so many words together since—since ever, I'd say."

Bryce ignored Tim, the ranch clown. Lunch awaited, and tantalizing aromas filled the room. Enchiladas?

In the kitchen, Frank zeroed in on the coffee pot, while Bryce headed for the fridge and the ever-present pitcher of lemonade. Tim snagged a bottle of water, and the three men proceeded to the dining room and slid into their customary seats. Derek's was noticeably empty, as were two more place settings.

"Where's the boss?" Tim helped himself to a generous portion of the enchilada casserole, then passed the dish to Frank.

"Right here." Derek strode to the table and took his place. "Cecily and Grady should be here any minute."

The rumble of a car engine and the crunching of gravel said Cecily—and their new *hand*—had arrived. Bryce pushed his plate aside.