

Chapter 1

“Hey, grab the coffee, will you Syd?” Colt Dickenson was Indian dark and cowboy lean. He had a take no prisoners grin and a rugged, working man’s body. But none of those attributes was particularly surprising. What stopped Sydney dead in her tracks was his easy informality, the offhand camaraderie with which he seemed to treat every individual who crossed his well-trodden path...including paying guests.

This was Sydney’s third day in South Dakota. Her second at the Lazy Windmill, the ‘anywhere’ Cousin Tori had found for her. A way to escape from the chilly reception of her family and a means of visiting the state of her mother’s

origins.

The Lazy was a strange place, more underfunded working ranch than cushy vacation spot. A place where they did not, apparently, have staff to fetch and serve.

“Not necessary,” Emily said. Emily Kane, the African American cook, had not yet reached her twentieth birthday. Sydney was certain of that. But the girl seemed to manage the weathered old farmhouse as easily as she did motherhood. Even now, Colt was flying her mocha-skinned baby through the air like a slow motion 747. The situation was disconcerting on several levels. Sydney, for instance, could barely manage being a *daughter* and had never, as far as she could recall, impersonated so much as a small engine Cessna. “Have a seat. Breakfast’ll be ready in a minute.”

“No, I’ll get it,” Sydney said and bumped herself back to the here and now, though honest to God, the kitchen was as foreign to her as Istanbul. In the world of the Wellesleys, a lady *managed* the kitchen. She did not enter it. The battered coffee pot was as unfamiliar to her as the scarred, claw-footed table that stood barely ten feet from the stove. But the dark bean fragrance that wafted from the coffee felt friendly and warm as she filled their cups.

“Thanks,” Colt said and cuddled the infant against his flannel clad chest. The baby, dressed in a nubby, parti-colored sweater that matched her mother’s, grasped his collar and stared at him with round, adoring eyes. “You sleep okay?”

“Yes.” The scene was surreal for a number of reasons. Colt Dickenson, for instance, had no blood ties to the child. And blood, Grandmother said, would always tell. Neither was he the mother’s lover; his devotion to Casie Carmichael, the owner of this tattered-around-the-edges ranch, had been immediately apparent upon Sydney’s arrival, making his dedication to Baby Bliss patently odd. Perhaps it was that very oddness that caused the pang near her heart. “Thank you.” It was strangely difficult to drag her gaze from the pair; she had never liked children. Not even when she *was* a child. Or, perhaps more correctly, she had never quite mastered being one. “I slept quite well.”

“So the bunkhouse wasn’t too cold?” He settled the infant into the crook of his right arm with extraordinary casualness and reached for his coffee cup with his left.

Sydney shifted carefully into a nearby chair. Limping, Grandmother said, should be limited to decorated war veterans and panhandlers with homemade signs. A Wellesley invited neither speculation nor pity. “It was fine.”

“Good to know.” He narrowed his eyes at the silvery curl of caffeinated steam as he raised the coffee to his lips. The clay mug was earth-toned and strangely misshapen. “We don’t get many guests this early in the spring.”

Outside the far-seeing windows, the temperature had not topped thirty degrees since Sydney’s arrival. “So this is spring?” she asked and cautiously tested

her coffee. True to form, it was strong enough to knock the uninitiated out cold and hit her with the gentleness of a stun gun.

“It’s not always so balmy this time of year. Is it Soph?” he asked and glanced up as Sophie Jaeger entered the room. The girl, once a paying guest like herself, was dressed in riding breeches and a sleek long sleeved T. She was even younger than the Lazy’s dreadlocked housekeeper, but if Sydney understood the dynamics correctly, she managed the ranch horses as efficiently as the other girl cared for the house.

“Coffee,” Sophie said robotically and poured herself a cup before sliding into a chair across from Colt. “And no, this isn’t spring.” She wrapped cold-pinked hands around her mug, sighed, and took a drink. “How did you get in here so fast?”

It was barely seven o’clock in the morning, but judging by their rosy cheeks and heat deprived expressions, they had both been out of doors for some time.

Colt grinned. “Motivation. Heard Em was making Bacon Bake.”

“With biscuits and rhubarb jam,” Emily added and gave something inside the discolored oven an exploratory poke.

Dickenson lifted his shoulders in an ‘enough said’ shrug. “You get chores done already?”

Sophie took a grateful swig of coffee and didn’t seem to care that it was eroding her teeth enamel as they spoke. “The stalls are clean. The horses fed.”

“They say she’s grounded ‘til she’s dead,” Emily crooned and plunked a pitcher of frothy goat’s milk onto the center of the table.

They stared at her in wordless concert.

“Garth Brooks. What kind of cowpokes are you? *Ain’t Going Down ‘Til the Sun Comes Up*. It was a hit single.” She propped her fists on curvy hips. “Do I need to sing the entire song?”

“No!”

“Thanks anyway.”

They spoke in unison and with some alacrity.

Emily deepened her scowl, causing Colt to change the subject, perhaps more out of a sense of self-preservation than curiosity.

“So who had the honor of milking Bodacious this morning?”

Sophie grinned as she reached for the pitcher.

“Again?” Dickenson swayed, rocking the baby against his chest. Sydney was fairly certain the sight wasn’t mesmerizing even though Bliss’s lilac booties didn’t span the width of the dark-skinned forearm that angled across her bulky bottom. “What was the bet?”

“Listen...” Emily sounded patently peeved and maybe a little impressed as she pointed a charred wooden spoon at the other girl. “There were like...a *hundred* pancakes.” She turned back to stir something on the stove. The house smelled like

Sundays from a bygone era. “Nobody should have been able to eat that many. Not if she’s human anyway.”

“Way to go, Soph,” Dickenson said and gave her a fist bump.

The girl shrugged, pretty face smug. “It’s a gift.”

“And a curse,” Em added grumpily. “Hey Ty.”

Sydney glanced toward the door. The boy who entered had the angular build of a teenager and the solemn eyes of an ancient. He nodded his shaggy head silently and took a seat across from Sophie. Their gazes met for one fleeting instant then snapped hotly away.

Dickenson raised his brows at Sydney as if sharing a little known secret about young love.

“How’s Angel?” he asked.

The boy lifted a shoulder that was leaning hard toward manhood. “Hungry.”

“If that mare eats any more we’re going to have to make the aisle’s wider.”

“Like you should talk,” Emily muttered.

The front door creaked and in a moment Casie Carmichael entered the room. Still shedding her well-worn, outdoor clothes, the Lazy’s matriarch was tall and lean with nondescript hair and unspectacular features. She did not, to Sydney’s way of thinking, possess any outstanding physical characteristics. So why did both males watch her every move as if she may, at any given moment, yank a rabbit out

of a hat?

“Morning,” she said.

Emily, still apparently peeved about the hundred pancakes wager, wordlessly pressed a cup of coffee into her hands.

Casie murmured her thanks and settled her gaze on Colt. “I can’t believe you beat me in again.”

“Em’s making Bacon Bake.” His tone suggested the casserole held the secrets of the universe.

“You didn’t have no trouble out there, did you?” Tyler’s eyes, always solemn, looked as worried as a hound’s.

“No trouble.” Casie cast a maternal smile over the rim of her coffee cup, though apparently there were no familial bonds there either. “But we do have three new lambs.”

“Already?”

“I would have checked the ewes,” Colt said. “But...”

“...there’s Bacon Bake,” Sophie finished for him. He chuckled as he pulled out a chair for his fiancée and Emily nestled a basket of steaming biscuits between two mismatched plates.

“I suppose the lambs are going to start coming for reals any time now,” the cook said.

“Like darts from a blowgun.”

“I’ll take the night shift,” Tyler said.

“Don’t you have an essay due?” Casie set her mug on the table before pulling the baby into her arms and settling into a chair.

“For Mrs. Trembly’s class?” Colt asked and taking the seat next to her, poured milk into her glass. It had the consistency and hue of fresh whipping cream.

Ty nodded and Colt shivered.

“Holy sh...” He paused, cast a wary eye in Casie’s direction and left the expletive die on his tongue. “Listen, I’ll take night duty. What’s a couple hundred sheep compared to Terrible Trembly? You just make sure you don’t piss her off. She’s been gunning for me for more than a decade.”

“What’d you do?” Emily asked and set a bubbling casserole beside the crock of preserves.

“Nothing,” Colt said and slathering butter onto a biscuit, slipped it almost surreptitiously onto Casie’s plate.

His fiancée’s expression was an exasperated meld of gratitude and amusement. “Except glue her chair to the floor.”

“Well there was that.

“Help yourself, Syd,” Colt said and indicated the Bacon Bake.

She took a modest serving and turned the handle of the spatula toward

Sophie, who wasn't, she noticed, quite so cautious about portions.

"And hide her lesson plan," Casie added.

Colt grinned and dished the entrée onto both of their plates.

"And turn chickens loose in her classroom."

"That was probably my best..." he began, but one glance at Casie made him clear his throat and taste his breakfast. After the first bite, he cast a dreamy glance at the cook and thumped a fist against his chest as if the emotions there were too much to express in words.

Emily rolled her eyes as she lifted the baby from Casie's arms, but didn't quite manage to hide her grateful smile behind the child's buoyant curls.

Quiet settled in for a moment, broken only by the sound of clinking flatware and contented sighs. Sydney sampled a biscuit. It was unreasonably tasty, possibly because it consisted of approximately five hundred fat grams per serving.

Colt was the first to break the silence.

"How's Evie doing, Soph?" he asked.

The girl's milk mustache looked ad campaign perfect beneath her polished features. "At riding or driving?"

"I don't know." He turned toward Sydney and raised his brows at her sparsely filled plate but didn't broach the subject. "Which do you prefer, Syd? Saddles or carriages?"

“What?” She felt the muscles tighten like winched ropes across her shoulders and back.

“Horses,” he said. “You do ride, don’t you?”

“No!” The word darted from her lips. She forced a smile and abandoning the half-finished biscuit, pushed her hands beneath the table. She had been warned against stressing her still-knitting femur and fragile spine. But no one had said she wouldn’t *want* to ride. That her hands would shake and her heart pound at the very thought of doing that which had once made her life worth living. “I just came to relax.” She tapped her thigh with a restless index finger. “I enjoy hiking.” Walking was, in fact, highly recommended to hasten her rehabilitation. “I don’t ride.”

“Well...” Colt polished off a rhubarb jammed biscuit and reached for another. “We can fix that.” He cut his gaze toward Sophie. “You’ve got some time for a lesson, don’t you?”

Sydney entwined her fingers and felt sweat prickle her hairline. “That won’t be necessary.” The words sounded prissy and arctic cold against the farmhouse’s homey warmth. The room went quiet. It was Ty’s muted voice that broke the silence.

“Soph’s a real good teacher.” The boy’s tone was strangely soothing, as if he sensed her reluctance, understood her fear. “And you could ride Angel if you want. She maybe ain’t the best looking animal in the world, but pretty don’t pay no

bills.”

Casie’s gaze landed softly on the boy. Colt pointed at him with a fork.

“Now there’s an offer,” he said. “Ty loves that mare more than...” He skipped his attention to the teenage girl across the table from him. Their gazes met before she snapped hers away with a disapproving scowl. “More than most,” he finished and grinned.

Sophie’s cheeks pinked prettily and Colt laughed again as if all was well. As if the world was good and right and unfettered joy waited just around the bend.

But Sydney knew better. Unfettered joy was not for poor little rich girls like her. Good hearted men with knockout grins did not cuddle her like precious treasure against their flannel clad chests. Wounded youngsters didn’t bask in her healing presence. Disaster struck at mind-numbing intervals, leaving you with a disappointed father and throbbing limbs. She pressed a palm against her thigh and tried to breathe through the memories.

It was Emily’s rendition of *North To Alaska* that brought Sydney back to the present. Sung to a rap beat, it was punctuated with a spoon against the countertop and performed without so much as a nod to any recognizable tune. Sophie groaned, Ty cracked a captivating grin and Colt catapulted into a ludicrous story about the correlation between barometric pressure and bucking bulls.

And despite everything, their cozy goodwill seeped slowly into Sydney’s

bones like errant sunshine. As they talked and laughed and badgered, hope unfurled cautiously inside her.

So what if Leonard Wellesley wasn't going to be nominated for father of the year? That Grandmother bore a striking resemblance to Adolf Hitler and David Albrook, her erstwhile fiancé, preferred the company of girls barely out of diapers?

The others gathered around the Lazy's battered table probable didn't come from perfect circumstances either. Yet they had somehow forged this astounding warmth, this unheard of contentment.

So maybe... Sydney's heart sped along in her chest. Her muscles trembled with anticipation. Maybe she could find the same thing. Maybe all she needed was a couple hundred acres of South Dakota.

The blossom of hope opened wider.

It was said that money couldn't buy happiness, but so far as she knew the theory had never been conclusively proven.