

Chapter 1

The world dropped no hints the day Erin's life changed forever. She walked out to the barn, her boots becoming slick and black with dew. Only the solitary call of a robin broke the perfect morning calm. The scent of cottonwood and wet sage hung in the crisp, cool air, tinged by a hint of mint, and she breathed it in. Stark, snow-capped peaks emblazoned in a pink glow jutted from forested slopes along the western side of the broad valley; the backbone of the continent. On mornings like this, living alone in Martinville didn't seem so bad. If only scenery paid the bills.

She pulled her thick auburn hair out from her jean jacket collar with one hand as she walked and it fell loosely to shoulder level. Erin's horse, Jade, nickered softly as she approached the old barn. She rubbed his nose when he shoved it through the weather-beaten fence rails, and then she slid a hand down his long, sleek bay neck, letting her fingers get tangled in his jet-black mane. She had always loved the smell of leather and horses, dust and sage. The big horse stood tall over her petite five-foot-four inch frame, but she leaned into him. Jade was about the only true friend she felt like she had in the world now. Fact was she didn't have much time or interest in anyone else. She and Jade had been together for five years, ever since she had left Sam.

The uninvited image of her ex-husband's handsome, condescending face shoved its way into her mind. She had married him right after they had graduated from Martinville high school;

far too young. After two years of marriage, she found him in bed with a blonde rodeo groupie. “Lighten up, Erin. It don’t mean nothin’,” he had said.

She shook her head angrily. To hell with his endless cowboy ego.

“Why did I have to ruin a fine June morning by thinking about *him*?” she said, and yanked the weathered old barn door open harder than was necessary, causing it to slam against the wall and dust to sift down from the roof.

Coughing, she waved her hand to clear the cloud. “Brilliant move, Erin.”

She desperately wanted to keep this place. Shabby as it was, it represented freedom and independence—the things she had fought so hard for. Mountain View subdivision, down the street, would swallow up the old ranch in a second if she let it go. The developer pestered her twice a week, until just seeing him made her want to hit something. Maybe things would get better. Maybe she could save enough money to fix the place up. Maybe she would find a better job than waiting tables at the diner, where the other girls tried to set her up with every cowboy who strutted by.

She peered through the settling dust and felt her way to the hay cage, where she grabbed down Jade’s breakfast and hauled it over to his stall. Jade was already waiting, and pulled a mouthful of hay out from under her arm before she could even drop it into the manger. That made her laugh, and the laugh settled her anger like the dust that had sifted to the floor.

“You’d think you hadn’t eaten for a week,” she teased.

Then from the far corner of the barn, she heard a sneeze.

Erin whirled toward the noise. “Who’s there?”

She owned no other animals except Jade, and besides, it definitely sounded like a human sneeze. She tensed. Images of murder and kidnapping. Reruns of a thousand news reports blared

in her head: *Women should never be caught alone.* Sweat broke out in her armpits despite the morning chill. But she moved slowly toward the offending sneeze, snatching up a manure shovel on the way.

“Who is it?” she repeated, hoping her voice didn’t sound shaky. A frantic shuffling noise answered. She kept meaning to take that self defense class that the women’s group put on every spring. Now she wished she hadn’t talked herself out of it. Someone was here. She gripped the shovel even more fiercely as she moved back through the barn, throwing open each stall door with a loud bang. All proved empty. Six old plastic barrels that she used for farm trash and barrel racing stood in the back corner. There might be enough room behind them to hide someone. She inched closer. Just when she was almost close enough to touch them, two of the barrels fell toward her. She jumped back just in time as they hit the floor with a loud crash. Two more barrels wobbled as someone scuttered between them and the wall.

“Hey!” She raised her shovel. “Come on out of there.” Then she kicked the nearest barrel back against the barn wall.

What am I doing? What if this is some kind of criminal with a gun? A lot of good this plastic manure scoop is going to do me. But she kicked the next barrel in line anyway, and to her surprise, heard a high-pitched yelp.

That didn’t sound like a gun-wielding gangster, although she supposed a gun-wielding gangster could fool you. That sounded like a woman or ... a child. She decided to keep up the illusion of bluster, and whacked the shovel loudly on the heavy pine of the stall behind her.

“Come out of there NOW!”

“Okay, okay,” came the frightened reply. “Jus’ don’t shoot!”

A skinny boy, no more than 10 or 11, rose up from behind the row of barrels, his hands in the air and his face as pale as a sheet. Well, a dirty sheet. Filthy, actually. He wore a beat-up cowboy hat and his sandy hair poked out from underneath it like so much straw. He was dressed in dirty brown pants held up by suspenders over a long-sleeved buttoned shirt that might have originally been cream-colored.

“Don’ shoot me Ma’am,” he said. “I ain’t armed or nothin’.”

Erin felt both like laughing with relief and yelling at the boy for scaring her so much. “Come on out of there. This shovel isn’t loaded.”

The boy sidestepped his way down the line of barrels, his hands still in the air, until he could come out from behind them. Then he stopped and Erin thought his scrawny legs might actually be shaking at the knees.

“What were you doing hiding back there?” she asked. “And put your hands down, for goodness sake.”

He dropped his hands to his sides like a puppet whose strings had been let go and stared at her wide-eyed. “I was just lookin’ for some shelter, ma’am. It gets mighty cold outside at night.”

“Yes, it does.” Erin leaned the shovel against the side of the stall. “I suppose you’re hungry?”

The boy looked so relieved she was afraid he might faint dead away. “Oh, yes ma’am. I sure am.”

She sighed. A kid. She didn’t need this right now. Still, he was kind of cute, like a lost puppy, and it wouldn’t hurt to feed him before she sent him on his way. It would give her a chance to find out who he was. “Well, come on then. It’s silly to be hiding out here when there is

a perfectly good house next door.” She beckoned to him and led the way out the barn door.

“Why are you hiding out here all alone, anyway? Are you lost? Did you run away from home?”

“No, ma’am, I ain’t lost,” he said as he followed her toward the house. Suddenly he went rigid and stopped in his tracks. “You ain’t takin’ me to old man Hensley’s house are ya’?”

What on Earth was he talking about? “No. This is my house. Mr. Hensley doesn’t live here.” *He must be delirious or something.*

The boy relaxed a little but still did not move. “Are you sure? It looks a lot like Hensley’s house.”

“I’m positive. My name is Erin. What’s yours?”

Momentarily distracted, he allowed her to steer him through the corral gate and toward the house. “I’m Joe.”

“Hi, Joe. Why don’t I fix you some nice hot oatmeal, and you can tell me how you ended up in my barn?”

###

Erin had barely set the warm bowl of oatmeal in front of Joe before he began gobbling it down.

“Geez, don’t take my hand off, Joe.”

He stopped shoveling. “I’m sorry ma’am. I didn’t mean to be rude. But I’m real hungry.”

“When was the last time you ate?”

Joe considered the question while he resumed shoveling. “Sometime yesterday, I reckon,” he managed between bites.

“Well, no wonder then.”

“Uh-huh,” Joe said through a mouthful of oatmeal. “Do you have any more of this?”

“Of course. I’ll fix you some more.” Erin took Joe’s bowl, and as she began to make another batch, she wondered if had a runaway on her hands. What was she going to do with him? Social Services? The police? What, or whom, was he running away from? She imagined a hulking, drunken father with a baseball bat and shivered.

“You’ve got a nice house,” Joe said as he left the table and wandered into the combination dining room/living room.

She looked around at the frayed curtains and the peeling paint on the cupboard doors. *No I don’t*, she thought. *This place is a dump by modern standards*. Sam didn’t own much, but she did get alimony. At least that helped a little. It eventually helped her buy Jade and this old rundown ranch. *What kind of a hovel did this kid grow up in? Or maybe he is just trying to be polite*.

“Thanks, Joe. Are you from around here?”

“Uh, yeah. Not too far. Hey, what *is* this thing?” He sounded frightened again, and she left the softly bubbling oatmeal to join him in the living room.

“Don’t you have a television at your house?”

Joe shook his head vigorously. “No, ma’am. I ain’t never seen one before. What’s it do?”

Good grief! Had this boy been kept in a closet all his life? “You watch shows on it. Here.” Erin picked up the remote control and pointed it at the TV. The screen popped to life and a few seconds later a morning news show appeared, the anchor telling about his next guest, who had just written a new book.

Joe gasped and backed away. His eyes grew wide with terror and his breath came fast.

“How did you do that?” he cried. “Is it witchcraft?”

Erin flicked off the set and stepped in front of it. “Heavens, no. It’s just a machine. Have you never seen a movie before?”

Joe peered around her at the now dark screen of the television. “I ain’t never seen anything like that before.”

This kid was getting weirder by the minute. “Well, it won’t hurt you. Come on. I imagine the oatmeal is done.”

Joe followed her into the kitchen and took the steaming bowl from her. He ate slower this time.

“I’m much obliged for the food, ma’am,” he said in a subdued voice, eyeing the living room.

“You’re very welcome,” she said. “And please don’t call me ma’am. It makes me feel like my mother. My name is Erin.”

“All right, ma’—Erin.”

Erin watched him eat, her own stomach churning. What was up with this kid? He was black and white against a color background. Or vice-versa. She wanted to know more about him before she turned him over to the authorities. Who knew where he would end up once they got a hold of him? She looked at his hands as he lifted the spoon in his fist. They were nearly black with dirt. At least she knew what was next. As soon as he finished eating, he was going to have a bath.

Chapter 2

Erin trotted Jade around the ring. With a touch of her knee and a flick of the reins, she turned him toward the middle of the circle. Another touch and shift of her weight and he reversed direction, changing his lead leg. Erin spoke quietly again and applied slight pressure with her knees and Jade moved into a canter. She continued to guide him around the ring and had him change direction several times. He followed her commands smoothly, almost seeming to know what she wanted before she spoke. Several laps later, Erin pulled him back just as smoothly to a trot, and then to a walk.

“You’re real good with that horse, ma’am, I mean, Erin,” Joe said from his perch on the top rail near the gate. They had come out right after breakfast, even though he still hadn’t had a bath. He had seemed agitated and wanted to see her horse. Watching her run Jade through his paces calmed him down.

“Thank you,” Erin said, steering the horse over to where Joe sat.

“He pays attention real good,” Joe said. He hopped off the rail and pulled the gate open.

“Most of the time,” she said, walking the horse through the gate and on up to the barn. She dismounted and tied Jade to the corral fence, then removed the saddle and hauled it into the barn with Joe following so closely he was almost stepping on her heels.

“Can I rub him down?” he asked.

Erin smiled at the eager light in his eyes. “Sure.” She handed him the curry brush. He was confidently brushing Jade’s back when she returned from putting the saddle away.

“You’ve done this before, I see,” she said.

Joe glanced at her in surprise. “Well, o’ course. Everybody knows how to curry a horse.” He stopped brushing. “By the way, where are the rest of the horses?”

“The rest? Jade is all I need. And all I really have time for.”

Joe began to brush again more slowly, frowning. “This has been the strangest morning of my whole life.”

“Why is that?”

He stopped brushing again and his skin took on an almost translucent paleness. Erin thought he might faint and lunged to his side. She took the curry brush from his hand and steered him to a straw bale in the cool shade inside the barn.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, brushing the unruly blonde hair away from his face. He looked suddenly smaller, deflated somehow.

“I just don’t understand what’s goin’ on. I snuck into this barn last night and thought I was safe. But ever since I woke up this mornin’, nothin’ is right.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, first this barn is different.” He pointed to the far corner. “Them barrels ain’t made out of wood. Your house,” he stood up and walked to the door of the barn. “It’s a different color, and it’s right where old man Hensley’s house ought to be. And where are the bunkhouse and the foreman’s cabin and the chow hall?” He turned with fear in his face. “And I noticed that your stove don’t run on wood, and that box with the people inside it...” He swung around and swept his arm toward the pasture and his voice took on a frantic edge. “Even the ground looks

different. The fence is all wrong. And the field ain't grazed down like it was yesterday. How can grass grow so much in one night? And you only got one horse!" He threw up his hands.

"Yesterday, I knew the score. Today I don't understand anything!"

He was on the verge of panic, and she wanted to do something, say something that would calm him. Only, she had no idea what he was talking about.

She felt like she was on an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Why did he expect her stove to run on wood? How could he have never seen a television, or even understand the concept of one? She looked at the barrels in the corner of the barn. He acted like he had never seen plastic before, either. And what about the grass and the other buildings he mentioned? Surely he was delusional.

A jet roared across the sky far overhead. Martinville sat under the route from Denver to Salt Lake City. Erin barely noticed them. But Joe threw up his arm as if to ward off a blow, staring horror-stricken at the sky. He backed up into the barn a few steps, then turned his frenzied gaze on Erin and backed away from her, too, until he had his back against the wall of the first stall.

"It's okay, Joe. It's just an airplane," Erin said, moving slowly toward him as if she were approaching a frightened horse.

Joe's eyes were wide. "Stay away from me! Everything has gone crazy. You must have done it somehow. Stay away!"

Erin continued to move toward him steadily, slowly, keeping eye contact, her voice low and calm. "No, Joe. I didn't do anything. It's okay. I won't let anything happen to you."

Joe pressed his body against the wall, looking around wildly. Erin was between him and the door, and he had backed himself into a corner.

He bolted for the door. And he was fast, too, but Erin anticipated what he was intending just before he moved. She grabbed him around the waist and both of them crashed to the floor in a heap. She held on tight, and it wasn't easy. Joe clawed and kicked like a calf at branding time. But he was so skinny, and finally she managed to climb on top of his back and hold him down until he quit struggling.

He lay panting, the side of his face pressed into the dirt and straw of the barn floor, eyeing her like she was the devil incarnate.

"Joe," she said quietly. "I agree that something is very wrong, but I assure you I didn't cause it. I don't know why you don't recognize these things around you. But I would like to help you figure it out." He looked up at her doubtfully. "If I let you up, will you try to be calm and talk this out with me?"

He didn't answer, and she sighed heavily. She wished now she'd called the authorities. How could he not know about airplanes? What century was he from anyway?

Wait. What century...

That's ridiculous, she thought, shaking her head. *That only happens in movies and storybooks. Still...*

"Joe. Do you know what year it is?"

The expression on the side of his face that wasn't smashed into the barn floor told her he was absolutely certain she was out of her mind. "What?"

"The year, Joe. What is it?"

He spit dust from his mouth in disgust. "What kind of person doesn't know it's 1875?"

Erin stared at the boy.

"Why you starin' at me like that? I ain't stupid."

“Joe, I want to let you up now, and I want to talk to you about this, but first there is something you need to know.” His one eye looked slightly fearful. “The year is 2007.”

Suddenly the floor under Erin exploded again as the boy began clawing and kicking and flailing for the door. Only this time his desperate screams were added to the mix.

“No! You’re wrong! You’re tryin’ to scare me. Let me go! You’re crazy!”

Erin released him, partly to avoid serious injury, and partly because she didn’t know what else to do. As he bolted for the door, she sat back heavily in the dust. He disappeared from view and Erin could hear him climb over the corral fence and land hard on the other side. Then just his running footsteps fading away.

She let him go. If he really thought he was from 1875, he would be back. Just as soon as he hit the main road. And saw the cars.

Chapter 15

The next day started in the dark, as usual. Erin felt groggy as she rolled out of her bunk. She dressed lethargically. At least she had the horses to look forward to. That was a bright spot. Mr. Chips was ready to ride. Maybe she could just take it a day at a time. Today she would ride Mr. Chips. That was enough to start with.

She sat on the edge of her bunk and began to pull on her boots. But something was wrong. She had her left boot about halfway on when she encountered resistance. Goopy resistance. Now what, she thought and held the boot up to her nose.

“Oh, perfect,” she said. Her boots were half full of fresh horse manure.

“Damn you, Pete Singleton,” she said under her breath.

She pulled off her left sock in disgust. Although she had another pair she had bought in town, it wouldn't do any good to wear socks if she didn't have boots. Padding barefoot out into the cold morning and trying not to cut her feet on the sharp rocks, she dumped the boots out on the ground. The manure made a soft splatting sound on the dirt. It also coated the inside of her boots. She picked her way up to the water trough by the corral, rinsing them out as best she could. She knew she would have to wear them wet or the leather would shrink up, but she couldn't face putting them on just yet, so she carried them up to breakfast with her.

Her bare feet and her stinking boots quickly became the object of quite a bit of smirking and laughing from the other hands, but she ignored them, and was very careful not to look at Pete, who seemed to be enjoying an extra measure of popularity this morning. She didn't want to

give him the satisfaction of seeing her anger. As soon as she finished eating, she went back to the bunkhouse, pulled out a pair of socks, put on the cold wet boots, and went to the barn.

Her feet felt like ice cubes for most of an hour, but they started to warm up as the sun got brighter. As she trudged around the barn, she swore she would find a way to get back at Pete.

By the time Joe arrived Erin had swept out the barn, shoveled manure out of the corrals, and hauled the water. The hard work had purged most of her anger, and now she felt calm enough to work with Mr. Chips.

“That was a mighty mean thing Pete did,” Joe said when she told him.

“I’ll find a way to get back at him somehow.”

“You and Pete have got a feud going all your own. You don’t even need the Kearneys.”

Erin had to smile. “It’s pretty stupid, isn’t it?”

Joe shrugged. “It’s just cowboy entertainment. You’re just the most interestin’ target right now.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that, but I guess you’re right.” She pulled a lariat from its nail on the wall and walked toward the pasture. “Maybe the novelty of harassing me will wear off soon.”

Bringing Mr. Chips in and beginning her work with him brightened her outlook considerably, like she knew it would. He was nothing special to look at, but he was smart and calm, and those attributes went a long way toward speeding his training along. She put the saddle and the bridle on him with no trouble at all, and he performed well with the long reins. Now it was time for the moment of truth.

She removed the long reins and hooked the riding reins over the saddle horn. Mr. Chips knew something different was about to happen. His ears flicked in Erin’s direction and he tossed

his head. Erin patted him reassuringly, and then moved to his side and leaned over the saddle, adding some weight and pressure to it, as she had done several times before. Mr. Chips stood still with his ears turned her way. After several repetitions of this, she then placed her foot in the stirrup and added her full body weight to it, leaning across his back, but still not committing herself in case he should balk.

He didn't balk, but stood calmly. She kept up a steady stream of soft talk as she worked, all her movements calm and confident. Finally, she swung her leg over his back and took up the reins. He shifted his weight from one leg to another several times, but otherwise stood still. From his perch atop the corral fence, Joe whistled softly in appreciation.

Erin knew that dealing with weight on his back while he was standing still was a whole different thing than carrying it when he was moving. But she kept her body relaxed and calm so he wouldn't pick up any nervousness from her. Gently she shifted her weight forward, kissed to him, and cued him with the reins the way she had with the long reins from the ground. After a moment's hesitation, he stepped forward and she released the cue, praising him. She continued working with him until he was carrying her around the pen at a walk, turning and stopping in response to her cues.

When she dismounted, Joe ran over, exclaiming, "Wow! He never even bucked once. I've never seen anything like it."

She grinned at him happily. "Now you have."

###

A few days later she was putting Mr. Chips through his paces, from walk to trot to canter and back again, changing directions in each gait, when Butch appeared at the fence next to Joe.

“He looks good,” Butch said as she rode the horse over to the fence.

“He never even bucked when she mounted up the first time,” Joe gushed.

“Is that right,” Butch said.

“And look how alert he is. She didn’t have to break his spirit.” Joe said.

“Your method takes awhile, but it seems to pay off in responsiveness. He looks real good,” Butch said.

Erin couldn’t keep from grinning.

“Maybe since this horse has survived my efforts, Mr. Hensley would reconsider letting me train Maverick,” she said.

Butch gave her his trademark stare for a minute and then nodded. “I think it’s time to show John what you can do. I got some hands comin’ in with some cattle for branding this afternoon. John will be helpin’ with that. Once it’s done, I’ll get him to watch you run this horse through his paces. Then we’ll see.” He squinted up at her. “That all right with you?”

Erin felt like singing. “That will be just fine.”

###

Branding cows was a dusty, muddy, noisy, smelly affair. Between the cowboys yelling and whistling, and the cows bawling, and the general confusion, it was a wonder to Erin that the whole bunch didn’t just stampede through the corral fence and leave the county.

Snider, Cobb, Pete, Jimmy, Sedge and Peck brought in the nearly two-dozen cattle, herding them into the big corral. The rest of the cowboys stayed out on the range with the herd. The men started a roaring fire just outside the corral and put in the branding irons to heat. Erin surveyed the cattle. There were several cows with calves and a few steers. She was surprised to notice that some of them already carried brands, and wondered why they would be brought in.

There was no chute to drive the cattle into. The men simply drove several cows through the gate into the smaller corral, then roped them one at a time. Peck, Pete and Jimmy rode into the group of cattle, cut out the cattle that were to be branded, and sent them through the gate, manned by John Hensley. Either Snider or Cobb would rope a calf around the neck from horseback, and then the other of them would throw it down for branding. Both of them roped a cow or steer, one catching it around the neck and the other getting its hind legs, before one of them dismounted and threw the animal over on its side. As soon as an animal was roped and down, Butch or Sedge would step in and apply the brand to the rear flank. The cattle bawled terribly when they were branded and the strong smell of burned hide filled the air. Erin watched the proceeding from the top fence rail with Joe. Once an animal had been branded, it was released and ran to the far end of the corral, near the barn. When the small corral became crowded, the branded cattle were simply chased back through the gate into the big corral. It was an amazingly efficient process and it would pretty much be wrapped up in less than two hours.

One thing bothered Erin, though. Every animal was being branded, even though some of them already carried brands. When she asked Joe about this, he shrugged, so she started to look a little closer. Moving to the far end of the corral, she studied the flanks of the newly branded cattle. One steer had the circle H brand over another older burn. She looked closely and realized with a jolt that the old brand was a rocking K, the Kearney brand. Several of the others were

similarly re-burned. She returned to the fence beside Joe, where she could see the branding process better, just in time to see Butch apply the Hensley brand over a clear Kearney one.

Betrayal soured Erin's stomach. All this time she thought she was working for the good guys. It had never occurred to her that the Hensley men would be guilty of re-branding. Especially Butch.

With difficulty, she held her tongue until the last cow was herded from the corral and Butch was putting the branding fire out. She walked over to him as he collected the hot irons.

"Why did you re-brand those cattle? Some of them clearly carried Kearney's brand."

Annoyance flashed across Butch's face before he hid it behind a stony façade.

"Every one of those cows belongs to John Hensley. Now they're just marked that way."

He turned away and carried the branding irons to the water trough, where he plunged them into the cold water with an explosive hiss.

Erin followed him. "How can you be sure they aren't Kearney cattle to begin with?"

"Because they're not, Erin." He said, turning to glare down at her. "I told you Kearney has been stealin' our cattle for some time now."

Erin couldn't believe what she was hearing. "But you're re-branding over *his* brand, too. How's that any different?"

Butch's eyes flashed. When he spoke again, his voice was hard. "It's different, Erin. You'd best keep to your own business. Seems like you have a horse to ride for John today."

He walked away. Gripping the trough with both hands, she tried to slow her angry breaths. An eye for an eye. It only compounded the wrong. It only encouraged the hate.

After a few moments, she realized that Joe was standing next to her.

"Things ain't perfect here, Erin. People just do the best they can."

She bit her lip, wishing she could fix all the injustice in his world. But she had to admit that Joe's attitude, born of growing up in this untamed frontier, was much more realistic than her own. In the absence of rules, people made their own. Fact was she had no idea how to solve this feud. She took a deep breath.

"Okay, Joe," she said. "What do you say we go saddle up a horse?"

###

Mr. Chips was waiting patiently in his stall and nickered when Erin and Joe came in. Erin rubbed his nose, and that simple act calmed her. She haltered him and led him out into the late afternoon sun. Joe brought the bridle and put it on the horse, while Erin hauled the saddle blanket and saddle out. It felt gratifying that Mr. Chips stood quietly while she put them on his back and tightened the cinch, even though the cattle were still milling and mooing in the adjacent corral.

When she looked up, she saw that Butch and John Hensley were already watching from the rail. Butch motioned her over to them, and she left Joe with Mr. Chips while she walked over to the fence.

"Just run 'im through his paces, like you did earlier," Butch said. It was like their conversation by the water trough hadn't happened. Perhaps he had disregarded her outburst. Or maybe it was just his way of changing the subject. Either way, she was just as glad to drop it for now so she could concentrate on Mr. Chips.

She nodded. "All right."

She looked at John Hensley. He glared at her hard for a moment, and then suddenly seemed to find something much more interesting to look at in the distance. It was hard to believe she had any chance at all of convincing John Hensley that she could train his horse.

She started back toward where Joe and Mr. Chips were waiting. Joe was talking to Pete, with Jimmy at his side. She eyed them warily. Both cowboys moved off as she approached.

“What did they want?” she asked.

Joe shrugged. “Just lookin’ at the horse. Said he looked good and strong.”

Erin thought there had to be more to it than that. She walked around Mr. Chips, checking the bridle, the cinch, running her hand under the back of the saddle blanket and between the saddle and the blanket. She stood back and looked at the horse. He seemed calm. She shook her head. She wouldn’t have put it past Pete and Jimmy to sabotage her somehow. But she couldn’t find anything wrong. No burrs under the saddle, no slices in the cinch, nothing. She looked at Joe and shrugged. Butch and John Hensley were waiting.

“Let’s do it,” she said.

Joe grinned.

She took the reins and Joe moved off to sit on the fence near Butch. Erin noticed that the cowboys were hanging around to watch, too, which didn’t do much for her nerves. She tried to shut them all out and focused all her attention on Mr. Chips. He pricked up his ears expectantly.

Moving calmly and confidently, she mounted up and moved the horse forward at a walk. He responded quietly and smoothly and she moved him into a trot and then a lope, circling the corral. With quiet cues she asked him to change direction and he did so without hesitation.

And then something went terribly wrong.

Mr. Chips suddenly threw his head up and hopped sideways. Erin spoke to him calmly and tried to pull him to a stop. But he snorted and took the bit in his mouth, pulling hard on the reins. His tail went up and he jumped ahead, terrified or in pain, Erin couldn't tell which. She managed to hang on and pulled back on the reins, trying to regain control of him. If she could get him stopped she could check the gear again and find out what was happening. Then Mr. Chips put his head down and tucked his back legs under. Erin knew what was coming but was powerless to stop it.

The horse began to buck. He bucked for all he was worth. Erin managed to hang on for three jumps before she was thrown clear and landed hard on her back.

It took a few moments for the stars to clear, by which time Joe and Snider had caught Mr. Chips, and Butch was heading her way. She pushed herself shakily to her feet and headed for Mr. Chips, not looking at Butch as she limped past him. Snider held the horse by the bridle and was talking softly to him, but he pulled against Snider's hold, prancing from side to side. She released the cinch and he immediately quieted. She rubbed the horse's neck. The poor animal was slick with sweat. She didn't even look in John Hensley's direction; sure she was no longer a horse trainer now anyway.

Behind her, she heard laughter. She turned to see Pete slapping his knees with unbridled mirth, Jimmy, Peck and Sedge joining in, and her anger surged.

"Joe, would you check the saddle blanket and the cinch for burrs please?" she said, keeping her voice even, and walked over to where Pete and the others sat perched on the fence rail.

Looking up at him, she said, "You about done?"

He sobered and looked down at her, then exploded into laughter again. The others started laughing again, too, and Sedge clapped Pete on the back. “Yeah,” Pete said, tears forming at the corners of his eyes. “Just about.”

“Would you mind coming down off that fence? I have something I need to say to you.”

Pete jumped down and walked up to within six inches of Erin so that he had to look down his nose at her. “Now, what did you want to tell me,” he said, still chuckling and grinning.

She took a step back and hit him as hard as she could in the face with her fist. Then she stepped up and threw her right knee into his groin with all her might.

Pete doubled over and blood spurted from his nose. The laughing in his wake stopped abruptly.

“Don’t ever mess with my horses again, Pete,” she said as he dropped to his knees.

Then she turned around and limped to the barn. Joe had Mr. Chips tied up and several large burrs lined up on a bench next to the saddle blanket.

“They were under the front of the blanket,” he said, looking stricken. “Mr. Chips didn’t feel them until you’d been riding for a few minutes and they worked their way back. I’m sorry, Erin. I should have seen that Pete was up to somethin’. I’m so sorry.”

Erin looked at the wickedly pointed burrs. Then she put a hand on Joe’s shoulder. “It’s all right. There was no way for you to know.”

The burrs had rubbed sores in Mr. Chips withers in only a few minutes. It would be a week or so before he could be ridden again. Joe brought in a bucket of water, and Erin washed the wounds gently. Then she retrieved some clean muslin that was used to wrap leg wounds from the tack room, and used Joe’s knife to cut a large enough piece to cover the sores to keep them clean.

“We’ll have to keep a close eye on these,” she said, “And keep them clean so they don’t get infected. Let’s keep him in the barn tonight, and in the corral for a couple of days.”

She turned around to find Butch looking down at the burrs, still lined up next to the saddle blanket.

Outside, Erin could hear the cowboys whistling to the cattle, as they pushed them out the corral gate and drove them back out onto the range.

“Well, so much for that,” Erin said. “I don’t suppose John Hensley will ever let me touch a horse again now.”

Butch looked up at her. “Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure of that.”

She stared at him.

“John seems to think that anyone who can be thrown off a horse and then get up and deck the man responsible is tough enough to handle his colt.”

Joe laughed.

Butch’s poker face cracked into a grin.

Erin shook her head and rubbed her aching back. “I may never figure this place out,” she said.

Chapter 28

Cane led them about two miles north, and then west into the forest. They broke into a meadow about five minutes in, and found Billy and Hank mounted and standing guard on the bloody carcass of a cow.

“Where’s everyone else?” Butch asked.

Billy spoke up. “Jimmy, Carter and Sedge are ridin’ herd up the valley.”

“Where the hell is Pete? He was supposed to be on night duty, too.”

“I ain’t seen ‘im for a few hours,” Billy said.

Butch cursed under his breath. “Did you see anyone else when you got here?” he asked them.

The three men shook their heads. “There was nobody here, just the cow,” Billy said.

“I ain’t seen no horses or boot tracks or nothin’,” Hank put in.

“Have you moved the carcass at all?”

“Hell, no boss,” Hank said. “We ain’t touched it.” He acted as if it was haunted.

Butch dismounted and walked slowly around the carcass, looking for sign. Then he squatted down next to it.

Erin dismounted and stared at the cow. It would have been funny if it wasn’t so gruesome. It looked like a Picasso painting of a cow, all the limbs not quite matching; as if a child had tried to glue its parts back together. It looked like the plate from the bunkhouse. And the barn the day she arrived. Except for the blood.

She moved closer, her eyes glued to the biggest of the jagged cuts. There was a strange quality about where the two parts met. She knelt for a closer look. A section about two inches long didn't look quite solid. Slowly, she reached her fingers toward it, wondering if it was like the barn.

“Erin?”

She looked up to see Butch and the others staring at her.

“Are you all right?” Butch asked.

She pulled her fingers back. “Yes,” she answered too quickly. “It’s just...so shocking. Who would do this? How?”

He shook his head, still watching her. “I don’t know.”

“It’s spooky, is what it is,” Hank said from atop his horse. None of the cowboys had dismounted.

Erin looked away. She studied the ground for signs of Black Jim. The grass was too thick to leave distinct hoof or boot prints.

“They shot it in the head,” Butch said, rising. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“What do you want us to do, Boss,” Cane said.

“There ain’t anything *to* do. Leave it for the varmints.” He mounted his horse. “Ride on back. The day shift’ll take over now.”

The three rode off toward the ranch in a hurry, obviously relieved to be away.

Erin stared down at the carcass again. It shook her. Is this what would happen to her if she tried to go back?

“Are you sure there ain’t somethin’ you want to tell me?” Butch said.

She rose, turned her back on the carcass and moved to mount her horse. “Yes, I’m sure.”

He rode back to the ranch with her. They didn't speak but she knew he was watching her. Seeing the cow had frightened her, and she felt sure he could see it.

When they were almost back to the ranch, he reached out and took her horse by the bridle and pulled them both to a stop.

She looked at him in surprise.

"You've seen something like that before, haven't you?" he said.

"No."

"Erin, don't lie to me. This is important. People could get hurt."

She wanted to tell him, wanted him to know everything. But she knew he wouldn't, couldn't believe her.

"No, Butch," she said, hating herself. "It just scared me, that's all. That anyone would be capable of that kind of mutilation is frightening."

She had always been a lousy liar. He searched her face, and then turned away, letting her ride the rest of the way alone.

###

After supper, she found him sitting on his porch, his feet propped up on a hunk of firewood.

"What do you want, Erin," he said coolly.

"I thought I ought to check your stitches. They probably need to come out."

He watched her silently.

“If we wait too long, the thread won’t come out easily.” He hadn’t spoken to her since this morning. “It won’t take long, and then I’ll go.”

He didn’t answer.

“Please.”

“All right,” came the grudging reply.

She started to fetch the lantern from inside.

“Joe’s asleep, so be quiet.”

She brought out the lantern and lit it, set it next to him. Its light deepened the shadow thrown by his hat brim over his eyes. But she could feel his stare. Kneeling next to his chair, she looked closely at the stitches. The skin had knit well already and there was no sign of infection.

“They need to come out,” she said, and retrieved the small sewing scissors and the salve from inside.

“I hope this doesn’t hurt too much,” she said. She rubbed salve into the cut for lubrication, feeling his breath on her face. She snipped the first stitch gently, then pulled it out with the tip of the scissors. He winced. When she pulled the second one, he jerked.

“God all mighty!”

“Sorry.” She sat back. “It’s begun to grow in. Please don’t jerk like that when I have the scissors so close to you.”

He rubbed his cheek with his hand. She waited. He lowered his hand and sighed. “All right,” he said. “But take it easy.”

“I’m trying.” She raised the scissors again and snipped. The next three came free easily, but the next three stuck. He made it through two of them before he jerked away again.

“Dang it, woman, that hurts!”

She sat back again, her hand tense. "I know it. But hold still, will you? It can't hurt as bad as it did when you got hit."

"It damn well can."

"Look," she said, frustration rising. "They have to come out or you'll be wearing thread in your face for the rest of your life."

"I never should have let you sew it up in the first place," he said under his breath.

"Too late now," she said shortly.

"Just get it over with."

"I'd be glad to." Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm down. Then she went to work again. Six more came out clean. Then she reached a section where the skin was stretched tighter over his cheekbone.

"This is going to hurt."

"It already does."

"Now it's going to hurt worse."

"Great."

She snipped and pulled the rest of the stitches, while he swore at her. The cut bled a little over the cheekbone, but it held together. She sat back on her heels. Her hand hurt from holding the small scissors so tightly.

"There."

"You done torturin' me?" he said, rubbing his cheek.

"Yes. But don't rub it too much or it might break open."

"Dang. You might as well have set fire to it."

"You're welcome."

She started to pick up the lantern to take it back inside, but he said, “Just leave it. I’ll put it away.”

She walked to the steps and then looked back at him. His face was still partly hidden by the shadow of his hat, his hand still on his cheek.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” she said, thinking of that morning, too, and his disappointment in her. “I wouldn’t have if there was any other way.”

His hand dropped into his lap. “Good night, Erin.”

###

Erin couldn’t sleep. Someone who worked for this ranch was helping Black Jim. But who? Had anyone changed toward her around the time the jump drive was stolen? She didn’t think so. She thought about each hand in turn. She hadn’t had much interaction with Billy or Hank, but it was clear by their reaction to the cow carcass this morning that they knew nothing about it. Same with Cane. Snider was unerringly respectful of her. It was hard to believe there was anything beyond the face value with him. Cobb rode with Snider a lot. The two were good friends. And anyway, Cobb was too simple to be part of this. Same with Jimmy; too young and blatantly naïve.

Now Sedge, he was a bit sinister. He was decidedly unfriendly and kept to himself a lot. And she and Joe had found the plate near Sedge’s bunk. But she couldn’t imagine him working with anyone on anything, let alone Black Jim. Besides, he wasn’t sophisticated enough to be involved. Erin shook her head. No, it wasn’t him.

That left Peck, Carter, Pete, Tom and Sanchez. Peck was too easy going. He was so comfortable with being a cowboy that Erin couldn't see him shaking up the status quo. Carter idolized Butch. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the ranch. What about Pete?

Pete was cocky and mean. But, she cautioned herself, that didn't mean he was involved with Black Jim and the cattle mutilations. Pete had stayed clear of her since the day of his practical joke on Mr. Chips, so she hadn't seen much of him. His bunk was on the other side of Sedge's.

She sat bolt upright. Butch's voice came back to her. "Where the hell is Pete? He was supposed to be on night duty, too."

"I ain't seen 'im for a few hours," Billy had said.

She got up and peered around the curtain that separated her from the rest of the room. Her eyes were adjusted to the dark so she could just make out the bunks. The men on night shift tonight were gone, of course, but the rest of the bunks were full. She counted down to where Pete's bunk was. He was there, snoring with the rest. She sat on the edge of her bunk, suddenly wishing she knew more about how Pete was spending his time.