

RODEO NIGHTS

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Thanks to the staff of the Cody Nite Rodeo
for their generous cooperation,
especially Ray Owen and Roberta Sankey,
and thanks to two genuine rodeo cowboys,
John and Mark,
who provided information and inspiration.

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helped this one come to life
(you know who you are) and especially to
Peggy Cleaves and Angela Devine
for saying
the right thing at the right time.

Chapter One

Stroke.

The word echoed in Kalli Evans's head as she hung up the phone with a hand that she willed into steadiness.

The word was there when she placed her own call to inform her boss she needed to take time off. Jerry Salk didn't argue, preferring the pinch of her temporary absence to the possibility of losing her altogether. She also knew it didn't hurt that her departure coincided with New York's slide into the summer business doldrums.

Stroke.

Her eyes stung. She ignored it. Tears wouldn't help.

Hanging up a second time, she pulled out her suitcase, pushed back the closet's louvered doors and surveyed her choices. Not much would translate to where she was going.

"Wyoming!" Jerry had bleated. "What on earth for?"

She hadn't bothered with details, just "family obligations." He wouldn't understand the loyalty that meant dropping everything because Baldwin Jeffries needed her. "He's not even a blood relation?" she could hear Jerry asking in perplexed disbelief if she'd given him the chance.

What Jerry had said was, "I thought all your family's in Connecticut."

"Not all," she'd said, though she had no blood ties to the Jeffrieses.

More than blood, she was related to them by ties of the heart.

And now Baldwin Jeffries had had a stroke that left

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him unable to continue the tradition that meant as much to him as life itself.

Five days into his twenty-first season running the Park, Wyoming, rodeo—running it every night, rain or shine, from the first Saturday of June through the last Saturday of August—“Jeff” had shocked everyone who’d ever known the indefatigable fixture of the region and sport by crumpling to the rodeo-office floor.

Stroke.

The mirror reflected her tight face, and she acknowledged the grim word was not echoing alone.

Walker Riley.

Whatever had happened between her and Walker, she never questioned that his loyalty to Baldwin and Mary Jeffries was every bit as strong as hers. So there could be no doubt she would see him in Park.

She lifted her chin at her reflection. It didn’t matter. Walker Riley and the feelings she’d once had for him belonged to the distant past, when she had been young and foolish. Very foolish. Foolish enough to marry him.

* * * *

He could have stayed on the interstate nearly to Billings before dropping south. Probably would have been faster.

The left side of Walker Riley’s mouth twisted up, more with hard-earned self-knowledge than humor.

He’d known damn right well it would be slower-going on two-lane 291. And as for passing through Yellowstone Park . . . well, between the tourists and the way even his lionhearted camper-loaded pickup labored with the mountain roads, his rate of speed hadn’t been much more than a crawl. Couldn’t even fool himself he’d enjoyed the scenery. He’d hardly looked out the window beyond checking traffic now and then.

Spent too much time looking into himself. And the past.

He made a noise that caused the gray-muzzled dog to look up from its cedar-stuffed pad on the seat next to

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him. He laid his right hand on the dog's flank, and with that reassurance, the animal dropped its head down.

Looking into himself and the past . . .

More worthless pursuits were hard to think of.

A flash of color slid past on his left. The roof barely came level with where his elbow stuck out the open pickup window. Low and sleek, the car hurtled toward the future like a bat out of hell. Which was how fast it needed to go if the idiot hoped to pass him on the tight curves snaking through high-walled Shoshone Canyon. Why, to pass his truck like that, that jerk must have been going—Walker glanced at his speedometer and his righteous indignation fizzled—not all that fast.

He and his pickup definitely weren't hurtling toward the future. More like turtling.

He fed the pickup more gas.

Up to a few years ago, he'd been one to live in the present, taking each season as it came, not pining for the one behind or the one to come. These days he'd found himself more in accord with looking to the future. Maybe that was maturity.

The left side of his mouth rose again, though he was careful to make no sound that would wake Coat. 'Bout time he acquired some maturity, wasn't it? His birth certificate said he was thirty-three and some days his body said he was a hundred and four.

So it was a good thing he was growing up enough to give the future a nod now and then. But the past . . .?

The past was what he was driving toward, no matter how slowly he went.

* * * *

Kalli had forgotten how the wind could blow in Park, Wyoming. Even in early June. She pushed a long strand of hair off her forehead. She should have taken time to put it up, the way she'd worn it flying from New York yesterday.

Holding her hair with one hand, she squinted against the brightness, trying to read the expression of the man

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making his way toward her from the buff-colored brick dignity of the Shoshone County courthouse.

Tom Nathan had told her to meet him here at ten, after he'd attended a breakfast meeting of the rodeo committee.

She'd arrived at 9:40. She would have gone directly to the meeting of the independent committee that contracted with Jeff each year to produce the rodeo—if Tom had told her where it was being held. Which likely was why he hadn't told her.

Tom Nathan's leathered face gave nothing away. Neither did his habitual easy gait.

"Well?" she demanded.

He took the final three steps, stopped in front of her and sighed. He said nothing.

"Did they accept? What happened?"

"Just what I expected."

"What does that mean?"

"They're highly impressed with all that gaudy success you've been having. Had some things to say that'd turn your head right around."

"But?"

"Yeah, 'but.' "

"Damn." She turned into the wind, letting it stream her hair away from her face and burn tiny bits of dust into her eyes until they watered. "Damn, damn, damn. You'd think they'd cut some slack—for Jeff. After all the years, after all the success Baldwin Jeffries has brought them.

"They haven't forgotten."

"Then why won't they give me a chance to run it for him? I know what makes a business go. Before I can advise someone to buy into a firm I have to know if it's a good investment, and to do that I have to know if the company's working, if it can work—I have to know how to make it work."

"Don't have to convince me."

"All businesses follow certain similar concepts. Even rodeo."

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Did they still think of her as the child who'd been Jeff and Mary's summer visitor? Or the girl who'd followed in Walker Riley's wake? That was a lifetime ago. She was thirty-one now, another person.

"They're willing to give you a chance."

"What?" Then why did Tom look as if he had something to say he knew she wouldn't want to hear?

"They just want to be sure things'll go on the way they have under Jeff and Mary. Can't blame them. Rodeo means a lot to this town. It's a draw. Folks don't just pass through Park, they stay for the rodeo, they have a meal, they buy souvenirs, they spend the night in a motel. If something happens to the rodeo, you could say it happens to the whole town."

From the first Saturday in June through the last Saturday in August, the rodeo's the daily pulse of this town.

Jeff had first described it that way when she was eleven years old. That first year her father had sent her west for a summer on his college roommate's ranch. Each of the other three Evans children had followed, sometimes for one summer, sometimes two. But Kalli had returned every summer. And she knew what the rodeo meant.

No, she didn't blame the committee for wanting to ensure the rodeo's success. She did, too. It was the one way she could help repay Jeff and Mary for years of love.

"You're mostly an unknown quantity, far as they're concerned, Kalli. You know business, but you don't know rodeo."

She shook her head, sensing what was coming the way an animal senses a thunderstorm.

It didn't stop him.

"They insist on having somebody involved who knows rodeo. Knows it inside out."

The storm was closing in.

"You could do it, Tom. After Jeff, there's nobody better

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at producing a rodeo. You'd be a consultant, someone for me to call on."

"I would if I could, you know that. But I can't be two places at once. Not even for Jeff. I've got a full plate this season and they want someone who'll be here all summer. Someone who's been around rodeo 'most all his life. Someone who knows the town and the circuit . . ."

They both knew the someone.

She'd decided last night, after seeing Jeff, still and frail in the hospital bed, and Mary, shaken but calm by his side, that she would stay for as long as it took to get them through this. But she hadn't bargained for what Tom was asking.

A meeting with Walker, yes, but a summer? Reaction swelled in her. Not panic— Why should she panic?

This wasn't panic, but wariness about a summer of working side by side.

"It's the only way, Kalli. The only way to keep it for Jeff. And you know what it means to him..."

Rodeo was the blood that ran through Baldwin Jeffries's veins. It was, after his wife, Mary, his love. It was the children he'd never had, and it was as well loved, cared for and fretted over as herself . . . and Walker.

"So I guaranteed the committee you'd be having someone with plenty of rodeo knowledge working with you. And the two of you would work together for Jeff's sake."

"He might not come."

"He'll come. I called him same as I called you. He had a, uh, an obligation to fill over in Washington state, and then he was going to start driving." Something twisted in her at the certainty that the "obligation" had been to ride a bull. "Heard from him before the meeting and he agreed to whatever's necessary to keep the rodeo as his Uncle Jeff's. He's on his way. Ought to be here by tonight."

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* * * *

“Phew! If I’d known I’d be working harder with your help than when I was doing it all on my own, I might just have said no thank you when you offered.” Roberta Chester swept salt-and-pepper curls from her forehead, swallowed long and deep from a can of soda and tried to glare at her new boss.

“I never offered to help,” Kalli amended mildly. “I said I wanted you to show me how things run.”

As always in moments of crisis or uncertainty, Kalli had tackled work as if it would keep the demons at bay.

“Yeah, that lasted about ten minutes,” Roberta said. “Then you started showing me how to run things better.”

Kalli looked at the older woman, who’d been rodeo secretary for four years. In the chaotic three days since Jeff’s stroke, Roberta Chester had kept the rodeo running. She might resent a stranger coming in and taking over.

Kalli should have known better. She did know better.

“No sense looking at me like that, Kalli. I haven’t gotten my nose out of joint, so there’s no need for you to be thinking of ways to get it back in line.”

No sense pretending Roberta hadn’t hit the nail on the head, either. “I just didn’t want you to think I was ungrateful. I barged in here and—”

“And came up with some good ideas. You’re right, I should wring your neck for that.”

Kalli grinned a little sheepishly and the other woman burst out laughing.

“New York can’t be half as tough a nut to crack as we hear, if you’re any sample, Kalli. Way Jeff and Mary tell it, you’ve got that town by the tail, holding your own with the hardest of hardheaded businessmen. But here you are worrying about hurting the hired help’s feelings. Doesn’t look like you’re so tough, after all.”

“Don’t let appearances fool you, Roberta.” Others had, and it had cost them. Sometimes to seven figures. “I can be as tough as I need to be.”

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“Good. You’re going to need to be if you’re really thinkin’ I’ll use that computer.”

Kalli laughed at Roberta’s dour look at the laptop she’d brought. It should serve the rodeo’s needs, for now. She wasn’t as sure about the endurance of the small printer.

“You’ll be amazed how much easier it is to track results,” she assured Roberta.

Or it would be as soon as she set up a format for them. It would take some adjusting, since times determined winners in calf roping, team roping, steer wrestling and barrel racing, but points decided bareback bronc, saddlebronc and bull riding. Keeping track of those individual results, then mixing the two types to determine overall top performers didn’t fall into any of Kalli’s usual systems for assessing businesses.

Kalli looked around the rectangular, one-room rodeo office. So different from her recent life, yet so familiar. Familiar from that lifetime ago when she had adored Walker Riley.

A counter the length of the room left three and a half feet open on one side and six feet on the other. The wider section held two desks, three tall filing cabinets and a cart with a telephone, answering machine and fax machine. The only object on the other side was a strip of wood under two windows. Protruding nails held clipboards with entries, standings, results, rules and notices. On the narrow south end, one door led to a closet, another to a toilet and sink. The north wall held a window and the outside door.

An incongruous setting for her high-tech computer, although the fax machine indicated the electronic age had made inroads here.

“We need that contraption to keep up with the national rodeo association in Colorado,” Roberta said, as if reading Kalli’s mind. “I’ve just now mastered it, and you’re wanting me to try a computer?” She sighed. “Well, if you’re willing to try teaching an old dog new tricks . . .”

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One smart old dog, Kalli thought.

"In a couple days, this will all be second nature," she assured the secretary.

"So you say."

That skeptical grumble didn't fool Kalli. She leaned back in the hard chair next to Roberta's, stretching.

"And then we should tackle getting the complete books on the computer. It can simplify billing and end-of-year statements and tax information like you wouldn't believe."

Roberta shook her head. "Jeff takes care of that himself, just asks for a little typing and envelope-licking now and then. So it couldn't get much simpler for me."

"Well, then it will be easier on Jeff when he comes back." She'd need to find those books, make sure everything was in order.

The automatic reminder fled nearly as soon as it formed. Unwillingly, her eyes went to the clock again. Almost six. Despite the lingering sunlight, it was nearly the hour that officially divided day from night.

He ought to be here by tonight.

She pushed the thought aside. The office would reopen in about an hour for the business of the night's rodeo, and to take future entries. Neither she nor Roberta would have much time to spare until ten-thirty or so.

"You better take a break, get some supper, Roberta."

She pushed back the chair and stood, stretching again.

"How about you? You must be starving, since you missed lunch."

Kalli had spent her lunch break at the hospital. She wasn't even sure if Jeff was fully aware of her presence, though she'd thought the expression in his eyes had changed when she came in. Surely that was an improvement from the night before

"I don't feel much like eating. Maybe later."

"Nervous?"

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Kalli shot her a sharp look, but Roberta had bent over to retrieve her handbag from the bottom desk drawer.

“Because this is my first rodeo in charge? I don’t—”

“I don’t mean about the rodeo.” Straightening, Roberta looked her in the eyes. Something about the dark brown gaze wouldn’t allow Kalli to look away. Something direct, commanding and maybe a little compassionate.

“I mean about seeing Walker.”

“How did you know . . .?”

Roberta laughed. “C’mon, Kalli, you didn’t stick around the rodeo long from what I hear, but you’re smart enough to know what it’s like. Folks might cover a hundred thousand miles or more a year, but the circuit’s like a small town. Complete with concern for your neighbors and a thriving grapevine. It’s just a very mobile small town.”

Kalli sat on the edge of the desk. Roberta was right, she should have known.

“I met Walker in the first few weeks I was working for Jeff and Mary,” Roberta said. “Took a shine to him right away, too.” Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t go looking like that, girl. He never said a bad word about you. You should know him better than that. ‘Fact, he never said a word about you at all. But there was talk. Even though it’d been a while since you’d left.”

Kalli just bet there’d been talk. Even years later. And it wouldn’t have been in her favor. Like any small world, rodeo fiercely defended its own.

“Got to admit,” Roberta went on, “I was prepared to not like you, considering. Even with Jeff and Mary singing your praises. But . . .”

In that trailed-off word, Kalli felt an approval that warmed her.

“Thanks, Roberta. But it was a long time ago. We were kids. It’s long-forgotten. And there’s no cause to be nervous. This is something that needs to be done for Jeff’s sake. That’s what’s important.”

“Sure.” Roberta didn’t bother to make it sound

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convincing. "I'll run to the Sandwich Shack and pick up a burger and salad to bring back. What do you want?"

"Nothing, really, I—"

"I didn't ask if you want something. I asked what you want. But if you're not choosy, I'll pick it myself."

The door clicked shut behind her before Kalli could think of a response to such high-handed thoughtfulness.

* * * *

The sound of a car engine brought Kalli's head up. The car stopped immediately outside the office; only then did she realize it had been shadowed by another. The second engine also turned off and she heard doors slam and greetings exchanged. Roberta and Tom Nathan.

She breathed again.

They didn't come in right away, and in a few seconds she knew why. A third engine sounded, deeper, more powerful than either of the first two. She could imagine it following the rock-strewn, dust-thick drive as it curved past the arena, widened into an informal, weed-dotted parking lot and eventually led to the office.

The third engine shut off, followed immediately by the opening of the office door. Roberta came in alone, leaving the door open behind her.

"Here's your supper." She swung up the gate of the counter, set a bag on the desk in front of Kalli and added in the same tone, "Walker just drove up."

Kalli recognized the generosity in the woman's warning, but didn't answer, not taking her eyes off the desk calendar provided by a local feed store. This first meeting was bound to be awkward, she wouldn't pretend otherwise. But it had all been so long ago, and she'd been over him so long. Still, her mind refused to make sense of the familiar grid of days and dates for the month of June.

Outside, Tom greeted Walker. She heard in his voice a blend of pleasure at seeing him and sadness at the circumstances. Then Tom took the two steps up to the

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office door. Behind him, she heard booted feet on dried earth and thought she could smell the sun-warmed dust they stirred.

Just outside the door, Walker said he'd gotten into town a while ago, then answered another question. His voice was low and slow, the cadence as basic as her own heartbeat.

"Yeah, went direct to the hospital. Jeff was sleeping, but I saw Mary. Thought I'd make a circuit of the grounds here before checking in with the office, but cut it short when I saw you folks pulling in."

The calendar snapped into orderly focus before Kalli's eyes. Of course he'd check the rodeo grounds first.

Walker was in the room. She couldn't say she'd heard him come in and she hadn't looked up from the desk, but she knew.

"Hey, Kalli."

Ten years.

Ten years since she'd seen the face she'd first seen when she was eleven years old, and had loved nearly as long. The face she'd watched change from a boy's to a man's. The face of the man she'd married.

The last time she'd seen him, as she'd given him his choice, his face had been unreadable except for the indomitable will that always was a part of him. Maybe she'd known right then what his choice would be. But she'd hoped.

Instead, he'd gone to compete and she had packed and left before he came home.

Slowly, she stood. For an instant, he was merely a dark outline against the bright rectangle of the open door, a silhouette from the past. But she knew him. That surprised her.

And now her eyes adjusted to take in the details within the outline. The jolt of recognition and familiarity shook her a little.

But as she'd told Roberta, she'd long ago learned to be as tough as she needed to be. She stood straight, her

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voice cool and steady.

“Hello, Walker.”

Walker Riley stood there, not six feet from her, so familiar and so unknown. None of it seemed real.

“You look good, Kalli. Different, but good.”

Her chin rose at that, and she let the memories drain away.

“You look just the same, Walker.”

One side of his mouth lifted in a half grin. That was different; he’d always grinned full-out before.

“Not hardly.”

He crossed the wooden threshold that decades of booted feet had worn into a smooth dip.

He did look older. But rather than softening his edges, the years seemed to have sharpened them, so his cheekbones and jaw stood out, looking more angular, casting deeper shadows. His skin was taut and tanned.

Stepping up to the opening in the counter, he pushed the straw cowboy hat back from where it had ridden low on his forehead, then apparently thought better of it and removed the hat. Caught between his big, powerful hands, it seemed to shrink. His hair, as thick and dark as ever, carried a ridge where the hat had rested.

His eyes hadn’t changed, the color as vibrant as a blue jay’s back, though the creases had deepened through years of squinting into the sun. The way he used his eyes hadn’t changed, either. His slow, open regard surveyed her from her hair down to her toes.

Years in New York, years of confidence and accomplishment, allowed her to stand steady under his look, though she felt the tightening in her shoulders that was her personal tension register. It jumped a notch higher at something that flickered across his eyes as he took in her silk blouse, matching silk slacks, sleek belt and deceptively simple pumps. She didn’t need him to tell her the outfit was inappropriate for a night at the rodeo.

“Different, but good,” he repeated in a murmur.

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“I am different.” She deliberately schooled her voice, leaving her words a statement, not a defense. “And I’m very good at what I do. I’ll do a good job.”

He met her eyes a moment longer, a slight frown tugging his brows, then nodded once. “I’m sure you are good at what you do.”

He broke the look then—she hated the sense of being released—and turned to Roberta with that same, new half smile. “How’s my favorite rodeo secretary?”

“Probably smarter than the last woman you used that line on.” But there was warmth and affection in the hug she gave him, and in the gruff words that followed. “Glad you’re here, boy. And I know Jeff and Mary are.”

Walker patted her on the back before they disengaged from the hug. For a flash, his eyes came to Kalli and for that instant she had an image of being enfolded in his arms. Then he turned away, and her breath came out fast, as if she’d been holding it.

“Yeah, well, I figure even an old rodeo hand who’s had his brains scrambled a few times should be able to ride herd on the setup you and Jeff and Mary have going.”

Kalli felt the way she had once as a kid when she’d swallowed too much spicy, steamy chili. She could feel the burn all the way down her throat and into the pit of her stomach. A glance at Tom confirmed what Walker’s tone had just told her: Walker didn’t know about the committee’s stipulation. And, since both Tom and Roberta were looking at her, it was clear who they expected to break the news.

“You aren’t going to be riding herd alone, Walker,” she said.

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