

## **Was this what other people felt like when they had a family?**

The door to the foyer opened and Jane appeared, her gaze landing on Colt with a look of surprise. She was beautiful standing there.

“Micha took off on me,” Colt whispered.  
“I wasn’t quick enough.”

“She does do that,” Jane whispered back, and she put one twin toddler down on the pew between them before reaching for the other.  
“Were you being a stinker, Michal Ann?”

Micha looked at her mother innocently as Jane scooped the toddler into her lap.

“I think you were,” Jane whispered, but there was a smile tickling the corners of her lips. “Be nice to him, Micha. He’s not used to this.”

Jane looked over at him and smiled, and he felt that sense of camaraderie again. It felt good coming from her. It wasn’t about pleasing a group or fitting in... It was just a moment between the two of them. Of all the people who had known him for years, Jane probably understood him best.

And that was dangerous ground...

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# Her Twins' Cowboy Dad

Patricia Johns

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Her Twins' Cowboy Dad

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The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord,  
as the rivers of water:  
he turneth it whithersoever he will.  
—*Proverbs 21:1*



To my husband, whom I love more every day.  
The years together only make it sweeter.

## *Chapter One*



Colt Hardin stood by a window on the second floor of an office building in downtown Creekside, Montana, cowboy hat under one arm, trying to calm his thoughts as he looked out over the street. The building itself was only three stories, but it was the highest one in that little ranching town. A few pickup trucks slowed to a stop at the streetlight, windows rolled down to let in the warm July breeze. One of the trucks had an old dog in the back, trotting back and forth along the truck bed. The light changed to green, and the trucks rolled forward again. Colt preferred trails and fields, horseback or the rattling old ranch truck. Town was just too busy for his liking.

Colt tapped his hat against his thigh, attempting to quiet that jitter inside him. Uncle Beau passed away a few days ago, and he had

been called to the lawyer's office for the reading of the will. If Uncle Beau hadn't changed anything, Colt was inheriting it all.

Old Beau had been a complicated guy in life—a good rancher and a neighbor who could be counted on when weather went bad or times got tough. He was gruff, stubborn, often narrow-minded, but with a sensitive side that had surprised Colt more than once. But as kind as he could be to a neighbor, he was unmovable when it came to family. Once his mind was made up about someone, there was no changing it, and that character flaw had torn apart the family. It was only because those relationships were in tatters that Colt was set to inherit everything.

Beau's marriage to his aunt had shown him that marriage was difficult...and, it turned out, so was keeping any kind of functional relationship with a man's kids. Josh was an only child—it shouldn't have been that complicated. And Colt didn't have his own father in his life, so Beau had been the closest he'd had to a dad. That wasn't a sweet sentiment, either, because Beau was the main reason he'd been steering clear of getting married and starting a family of his own.

A patter of little shoes came up the stairs, and Colt glanced over as two redheaded tod-



dlers in matching floral-print dresses emerged into the hallway and immediately scampered in opposite directions. A slim woman with dark hair pulled into a messy bun at the back of her head appeared behind them and jogged after the squealing toddler who dashed down the hall, while the other little girl headed in his direction. The woman wore a pink sundress that fluttered behind her in a wave, and he couldn't help but wonder how she'd catch both children.

The little girls had flaming-red curls that bounced at the sides of their heads in matching pigtailed... Some distant relative of Beau Marshall, perhaps? The Marshalls were known for their fiery red hair. Colt was related to Beau through Beau's wife's side of the family, so his hair was a dark brown that women made a point of telling him shone auburn in the sunlight.

The woman scooped up the giggling girl and came back down the hall, a bag bouncing against one hip and the toddler secured on the other.

"Michal, come back here..." the woman called to the toddler who'd dashed in his direction, and the tiny girl looked up at Colt for a moment, round brown gaze meeting his soberly. She took a step to the side to head

around him and he matched her, eyeing her with a small smile. He could see the mischief in that little face.

“Could you just head her off?” the woman asked, hoisting the other toddler a little higher in her arms as she approached. “She’s quick.”

“I’ll try,” he said. The toddler swerved past him and he shot an arm out, scooping the youngster up as she let out a surprised squeak. She was as light as a barn cat, and those little legs gave a couple of kicks as he spun her around to face her mother, then handed her over.

“Thanks.” The woman’s face broke into a smile as she gathered the second toddler in her arms. “I thought it was hard to carry around two car seats. I had no idea how bad it would be once they were walking.”

“I can only imagine,” he said with a short laugh. “Michael—that’s an odd name for a girl.”

“I liked it.” She gave him a tired smile. “It’s Biblical. David’s first wife.”

“Oh, right.” Yeah, he vaguely remembered that. Not Michael, but Michal.

She looked over at the lawyer’s office door, then down at a scrap of paper in one hand that she could just see past the toddler. Colt noticed

the building address written in cursive, followed by the office number.

“Are you here to see Mr. Davis?” Colt asked. She nodded. “You, too?”

“Yeah. I’m Colt Hardin. And you are...?”

The color drained from her face and she licked her lips. Did she recognize his name? “Jane Marshall. Pleasure.”

“So you’re...a relative of Beau’s?” he asked, and his stomach sank. There weren’t too many Marshalls left—at least not in name. It seemed like every Marshall family had girl after girl, and after they married and took their husbands’ names there was yet another branch of the family tree without the Marshall name. Beau had complained about it to no end.

“My husband was Josh Marshall,” she replied. “He died, but Beau Marshall was his father.”

Josh—his cousin. Colt’s heart stuttered, then hammered to catch up. So this was the wife—but he didn’t even know that Josh had had kids. None of the family had ever seen pictures of his wife—Josh had only announced his marriage and then gone silent. This woman was slim, with dark hair and pale skin. She was pretty, but rumped. Her pink sundress tugged up at one hip where she held Michal, and the

other toddler was pulling at a loose thread at her shoulder.

“You’re Josh’s wife?” Colt repeated. His voice sounded choked in his own ears.

She nodded. “I am. And you’re his cousin. Josh told me about you.”

That was almost more than he could say. When Josh took off for the city, he’d cut contact with all of them except for an email once every few years with some pertinent information, like when he joined the army and when he got married. And the army had told them when Josh was killed... So Colt had heard absolutely nothing about her besides the fact that she’d married into the family.

“What was your name, again?” he asked.

“Jane Marshall,” she replied. “This is Sussanna and Michal, or Suzie and Micha for short.”

“They have the Marshall look,” he said. The fiery red hair that hung in curls around those identical, chubby faces, for one. “But Josh died, what, three years ago?”

“They *are* Marshalls,” she replied, her tone hardening just a touch. “Josh never got to meet them. He...” She swallowed. “He died before they were born.”

“He never told us—” he said.

“Yes, he did. He told his father I was preg-

nant,” she cut him off. “Beau contacted me once after they were born.”

“Really.” Beau had never mentioned it to him, and they’d worked together daily for twenty years. Beau had complained often enough about his ungrateful son.

So there had been granddaughters that Beau had never made reference to. That was just like the man—keep Colt working like a horse and never tell him anything that might interfere with his dedication to the ranch. Because Josh wasn’t any help at all having left for the city, and Colt had been the one to shoulder the responsibility of keeping this ranch running all these years. Beau’s health had only been getting worse, and he’d been handing off more and more of the daily running of the place until Colt was doing just about everything. Beau had promised Colt ten years ago that he’d leave him the ranch, keep it in the family. In fact, that was what pushed Josh away to begin with, when Beau told him that if he wasn’t going to take ranching seriously, he’d cut him out of the will. Not a single acre would go to Josh, Beau had vowed, but now that Josh’s widow was here for the reading of the will, he had to wonder if Beau had been stringing him along all these years.

Anything was possible with Beau.

The office door opened and Steve Davis, a portly older gentleman, poked his head out. Colt knew the lawyer relatively well. There weren't too many lawyers in Creekside, and he attended the same church that Colt did. Steve had been at the funeral.

"Colt, again, I'm so sorry for your loss," he said, holding out his hand.

"Thank you." Colt stepped forward and shook Steve's hand. "I appreciate it."

"And you must be Jane?" Steve asked turning to the woman beside him.

"Yes, that's me." She hitched a toddler higher on her hip. "I hope bringing the girls with me wasn't a problem."

"No, of course not," Steve said. "Let's go into my office."

Colt stood back as Jane passed into the office first. Micha stared at him with those big brown eyes as she passed, while Suzie seemed more interested in trying to squirm out of her mother's arms. He stepped into the office after Jane, then pulled the door shut behind him. Jane took a seat in front of Steve's wide desk and dug in her shoulder bag, emerging with a ziplock bag of crackers.

Colt eased into the seat next to her, and he watched as she doled out crackers into the tod-

dlers' hands. They sat down on the floor, two crackers each, and set to munching on them.

"You were the only people mentioned in Beau Marshall's will," Steve began. "Colt, you were named, as well as his grandchildren. After Josh's death, Beau updated his will so that their mother would be conservator of their inheritance if he were to die while they were still minors."

"He knew about them," Colt said woodenly.

"Yes," Steve confirmed. "He did. He spoke to me about them after they were born."

"Josh told him about my pregnancy," Jane said. "Josh died when I was about six months pregnant and he was deployed. Anyway, I emailed Beau with a couple of pictures once they were born. I think Josh would have wanted that."

"Did anyone else know?" Colt asked, still trying to make sense of all of this in his head. How much had his uncle been hiding from him?

"Not that I know of," Steve replied. "Beau was a man who kept his own counsel. I think you know that." Steve opened a file folder and looked between Colt and Jane.

"A conservator—what does that mean?" Jane asked.

"It means that you will be able to manage

your daughters' inheritance as you see fit and split the remainder of it between them when they turn eighteen.”

“Oh...”

“Let's get started, shall we?” Steve said.

Colt looked over at Jane, and she glanced toward him at the same time. She looked nervous—her lips were pale and she was fidgeting with that plastic bag of crackers. He knew what Beau had promised him, but he also knew exactly how far Beau could be trusted. Somehow, after Josh left because of this will and all the pain the family went through surrounding it, Colt hadn't considered the idea that Beau might change the will completely. But it was possible.

“To Colt Hardin, my nephew, I leave the ranch,” Steve read, his voice calm and quiet, and Colt felt a wave of relief. “I leave him all of the land, the buildings and the debt that has accrued over the years. Of anyone, Colt will be able to make something of it. I'm pleased to keep this ranch in the family.”

The ranch. *Thank You, God.* He knew the land was mortgaged to the hilt, but if everything just continued as it was, he could work his way out of debt. The ranch was his. Uncle Beau had done as he'd promised, and Colt could go on running this ranch like he'd hoped.



Steve turned toward Jane. “And to my grandchildren, the children of my only son, Joshua Marshall, I leave the herd to be split between them equally.”

The lawyer’s words hung in the air, and Colt felt like his breath had been knocked out of his chest. Beau had left Colt the land, but he’d given his toddler granddaughters the *cattle*? How on earth was he supposed to run a floundering ranch when he didn’t own the actual animals? Beau had kept his promise, all right. Colt had the land. But without that herd, without the income at market time, Colt could lose it all.

Jane stared at the lawyer as the moment seemed to slow down and stretch out in front of her. She’d had no idea what Josh’s dad had left to her girls, but the fact that he’d named them in his will had felt like an answer to prayer when she’d gotten the call. Jane didn’t know what she’d been hoping for, besides some family connection for her daughters. She had some death benefits from the military, but most of that had been soaked up in paying off debt. Josh had been a spender—when he got home, he didn’t want to worry about “bills and stuff.” He just wanted to enjoy the American Dream. So now she was proudly debt free, but very lit-

tle was left over besides the monthly payments that came to her. And twins were expensive to raise. She had to find a way to provide for her daughters because her job with a maid service had just ended. But cattle?

“What does that mean, exactly?” Jane asked hesitantly. “He gave my daughters cows?”

The lawyer nodded. “Yes.”

“How many cows are in the herd, exactly?” she asked.

The lawyer smiled indulgently. “Currently, it consists of four hundred and eighty cows.”

“What am I supposed to do with them?” she asked feebly.

Micha put a sodden cracker into Jane’s hand, and she instinctively closed her fingers around it.

“That’s where you have some decisions to make,” Mr. Davis replied. “You have a few options. Once the paperwork is finalized, of course.”

“Of course...” she breathed. “But what options?”

“You could sell the herd back to Colt here, for one,” Mr. Davis replied. “Or you could move the herd to another ranch, if you own one.”

“I don’t,” she murmured.

“Or you could work out some other deal with Colt.”

Jane looked over at Colt, but his expression was granite. He was staring at a spot on the carpet between his boots. Right now, she didn't even know where she was going to stay. She was homeless with two little girls and nothing but the hope of an inheritance to sustain her. She could feel the tears rising up inside her.

“First things first, though,” Mr. Davis said cheerily. “It's going to take a week before all of this becomes finalized. Then you can both talk to your banks and decide upon a course of action.”

“The inheritance is for my girls, though,” Jane said. “You said I'm allowed to sell the cattle?”

“Beau has his will set up in such a way that you, as their mother, can manage their inheritance—the cattle or the money gotten from the sale of them—until they are eighteen. At which point, whatever is left will be divided between them. He wanted to make sure that you could provide for them in their formative years.”

“Okay...” That was particularly kind of her late father-in-law. Jane didn't want to deprive her girls of their rightful inheritance from their grandfather, but she did need to care for the

girls in the meantime. At least there was some ability for her to do that.

“Why did he do this?” Colt broke in.

“That’s a good question,” Jane agreed. “We’re going to have cattle and nowhere to put them, and Colt is going to have a ranch and no cattle!”

“I think that’s the point, isn’t it?” Mr. Davis asked. “An earlier version of the will had the cattle going to Josh, not the girls. Beau was hoping that when he passed on, Josh might... come home.”

“And we’d work together,” Colt concluded.

“Yes,” Mr. Davis said with a nod. “That was his hope.”

Colt grunted, and Jane glanced over at him again. If this had been a plan to reunite the cousins, it was too late for that.

“So why leave the cattle to my daughters after my husband died?” Jane asked.

“The ranch was remortgaged,” Mr. Davis said. “There was a lot of debt, and he didn’t want to cut his grandchildren out of his will. He didn’t have any cash to leave to them, and quite honestly, he was hoping that after a few years, he’d have built up a little more wealth, gotten past the rough patch. Then he could have reworked his will again. He didn’t get the chance, unfortunately. This was his worst-case

scenario, I'm afraid, but he still hoped that his granddaughters would have a connection with the family again."

"He wanted my girls to know their family," she breathed.

"That's what he told me." Mr. Davis smiled gently. "But that's no pressure on you, okay? We all have a certain number of years in our lifetimes in order to make up for our mistakes. Beau ran out of time, as sad as that is. But that doesn't mean that you owe him anything."

No, she didn't owe Beau anything—he'd done nothing more than send her a couple of emails after the girls were born, neither of which had been terribly warm. She could see where her husband's emotional distance had come from. She'd loved Josh dearly, but being his wife hadn't been easy. If nothing else, by her brief communication with Beau, she'd understood why her husband had been so unwilling to reconnect with his father. But still, her daughters had family out here—and that would mean something to them one day. Their cantankerous grandfather was dead, but there were other family members that the girls might want to know. Perhaps even their "uncle" Colt. He was a relative, at least, and being considerably older than them, she wasn't sure what else to call him.

Suzie clutched at Jane's dress and she absently reached down to pick the toddler up. She'd come to the town of Creekside on faith. Josh's death had been difficult to deal with. Those vows had tied them together on a deep level, and while being married to Josh had been hard, she couldn't just walk away from him when it got tough, either. He'd never been an easily affectionate man, but she'd known how much he loved her. The stuff he saw in the army had left wounds that never healed, and she had only wanted to support him, let him know that she'd love him no matter what. Jane hadn't realized how much of herself she'd lost as she struggled to maintain her marriage until she was forced to look at life without her husband in it. Coming out to Creekside was both an act of faith and a desperate leap. She'd take anything God provided. She'd come all the way from Minneapolis with her toddlers in the back of a ten-year-old sedan to see what God had in store.

And right now, she had to wonder if that had been a mistake. Maybe she should have stayed in Minneapolis and put her energy into finding an apartment instead of driving out here on a wish and a prayer. But what did she have to stay for? The house was gone. She'd been laid off from her job. She could have afforded to

rent a tiny apartment while she tried to sort out her future... But that phone call from the polite Montana lawyer had sparked some hope inside her. He wouldn't say what the girls had been left, but he'd said it was part of the ranch, and he called it *significant, and definitely worth coming out*. Her husband had told her that his dad had cut him out of the will, so this was completely unexpected, and she'd had nothing at all to lose.

"I realize that you both have a lot of thinking to do, plans to make," Mr. Davis said, standing up. "For my part, I'll get these papers submitted and that will put the land into your name, Colt, and the cattle into yours, Jane. Unless you have any other questions, I believe that takes care of our business today."

They were being dismissed. Jane smoothed a hand over Suzie's soft curls, and her heart sank inside her. She had enough money for a few nights in a cheap hotel, and then she was out of cash. She had an emergency credit card, but she was afraid to start using it. She knew firsthand just how easy it was to slide back into debt. What she needed was a job that would allow her to care for her daughters at the same time. That was a tall order...especially out here in Creekside, Montana, where she knew absolutely no one.

“Thank you,” Jane said, reaching out to shake hands with the lawyer.

“Thanks, Steve.” Colt did the same.

Jane picked up her bag and rooted out sippy cups of juice for the girls. Sometimes keeping their hands full helped them to cooperate a little better. Jane guided the girls toward the door. Colt got there before her, and he opened it and let her pass through first.

In the hallway, the girls clambered toward the window that overlooked the street. They weren't tall enough to look out, but someone had left a magazine there, and they squatted down next to it, playing with the glossy pages. Even though Jane couldn't see it from where she stood, she knew that her car was parked just outside that window, packed to the gills with everything she owned.

“Did you know what was coming?” Colt asked as he pulled the door shut behind them. He was a handsome man, but not in the same way her husband had been. Josh had been full of laughter and jokes, while Colt looked more serious. Josh's hair had been the same bright red as his daughters'.

“No, I had no idea,” she replied, tearing her gaze away from him. “Although, I think you expected to get the ranch.”

Colt didn't say anything, but those dark eyes



drilled into hers. She sighed. What was she going to do—pick up her late husband's fight with his family? Beau could leave that land to anyone he chose, and he hadn't chosen Josh.

"Your uncle was an interesting man, wasn't he?" she said after a moment.

"You don't know the half of it," Colt growled.

"Losing the cattle isn't good for you, is it?" she asked.

"No," he admitted. "I know your husband was cut from the will, but I worked my tail off on that land. I don't have much else, either. So cutting the herd out from under me isn't good for me at all."

"I'm sorry about that." And she was. "I suppose you could sell, too, if you needed to."

"Not a chance," he retorted. "I've worked that land with Beau for twenty years. I've invested too much into the ranch, and I'm finding a way to hold on to it. Beau wanted that land in family hands."

"Yes, Josh told me about that." She could sense some bitterness there when Colt mentioned Josh. She'd known there had been a lot of family tension, but she hadn't been sure what she'd walk into, exactly.

"It was Beau's choice, not mine," Colt said.

"I know..." She sighed. "What do we do?"

I'm serious. I have no idea how to even start. I mean—”

“We wait,” he interrupted. “We have to get everything in our names first.”

“Yes, but then what?” she pressed. “I assume you'll want your cattle back.”

“Yeah, that would be good,” he said, and a wry smile turned up one corner of his lips. “I'll have to talk to the bank and see if I can get a loan...and buy you out.”

“How much are four hundred and eighty head of cattle worth?” she asked.

“A fair bit.”

“Oh...” Jane's gaze moved over to where her daughters were playing, their sippy cups on the floor next to them. It was a relief to know that her daughters would be provided for. She felt guilty enough using the death benefits to pay off all the debt. There was nothing left to put aside for them. Josh would have wanted them to have something.

“Where are you staying?” Colt asked.

“I don't know yet,” she replied, and she felt her chin tremble and tears well in her eyes. She looked away, trying to hide the rise of emotion.

“Are you okay?” Colt asked, his tone dropping.

“I'm—” She swallowed hard. “I'll figure it out.”

“I saw a car out the window—packed full of everything but the kitchen sink,” he said. “That yours?”

Jane managed to blink back the tears and she nodded. “That’s mine.”

“Are you moving out to Montana? Is this just a short trip? I’m just wondering how things stand.”

“I’m not sure yet,” she said honestly. “It’s been really hard since Josh died. We’d just bought a house that needed a lot of work, and I couldn’t make the payments alone. Josh’s death benefits helped me to get out of debt, but I had to sell the house. So... I haven’t decided where is best to land right now. I know that the way your uncle split this isn’t good for you, but him remembering my girls—it’s going to help a lot.”

“Hmm.” Colt nodded slowly. “Look, I’m not thrilled that my uncle did it this way, but this doesn’t have to be the end of the world for me. We’ll just have to iron it out. Are you willing to let me buy the herd back from you?”

“Yes, definitely. I have no use for cattle.”

“I’d really like to get this taken care of as quickly as possible. I have some cows ready for market, and keeping this ranch afloat relies on that income. So the sooner I can get

this sorted out with you, the better. Can you afford to stay in town for a couple of weeks?"

Jane sighed and looked away. "Not comfortably."

"Do you need to get back?" he asked, narrowing his eyes. "Because I have an idea. I don't want to overstep, but if you want a place to stay until it's resolved, you are welcome to stay at the ranch."

"Are you sure you want us underfoot?" she asked. "We're strangers."

"I want to buy back my cattle," he replied. "And if having you underfoot makes that happen faster, I'm happy with it." He shot her a wry smile. "I don't bite. Technically, I'm family."

Family—Josh's family, at least. She'd never met these people in her three years of marriage to Josh, or in the three years since his death. They were just a jumble of stories she'd heard. Beau might have wanted some sort of family reconciliation, but that didn't mean the rest of the Marshalls did.

"I don't want to stay for free," she countered.

"If you really wanted to pitch in, we need to clean out Beau's house. If you'd help me with that, I'd be grateful. Beau's sister is staying with me for a few weeks while we clean it

out, but she has a few health issues, and I'm not sure how much she can get done on her own..."

"That might be a bit personal. I didn't know Beau," she said. "Are you comfortable with me going through his things? Would his sister be okay with that?"

"She'll be fine with it. She wasn't really eager to do the job, either. She and Beau had a falling out some years ago. She's willing to help me, personally, but..." He sighed. "Look, maybe you'll find some stuff that pertains to Josh. As for me, I don't have time to do it all myself, and as Peg can tell you, Beau wasn't real close to that many people. Everyone who wanted a keepsake from Beau has already taken something. The rest just needs to be boxed up for Goodwill."

"Well..." She paused for a moment to consider. Maybe there would be some hints about Josh's childhood, or pictures that might be nice to keep for the girls. Who knew? This was her chance to connect with her late husband's family, for better or for worse. And with Peg on the scene, she wouldn't be alone on a ranch with this uncomfortably handsome Colt.

"Where would I stay?" she asked.

"There's an in-law suite in the basement of the house," he said. "It's got a whole separate entrance and everything, and that's where I

live. So you and the girls can stay with Peg upstairs in Beau's place. What do you say?" he asked, fixing her with his dark gaze.

What choice did she have?

"I'd be happy to."