

Chapter One

James Bradford stepped out of his black Mercedes and surveyed the Lazy L. The dude ranch was nestled in a lush valley, beneath the majestic Rocky Mountains near Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Through his expensive shades, he could see the corral in the distance. He could also hear the happy laughter of people. He took a deep breath of clear, crisp air.

“Not bad,” he muttered. Now he just had to see if the offer of work was still good. The ranch’s owner, Cliff Ledbetter, had offered him the job because Cliff was old friends with Jim’s uncle. Jim had met Cliff several times. But he was interested in the job be-

cause he wanted out of his current position as a stockbroker working on Wall Street. He'd made a lot of money, but not enough to buy and set up a ranch of his own.

He could get back to the life he wanted by coming here.

He entered the large house that looked to be the main building. Removing his shades as he entered, he immediately spotted a young woman seated behind the counter at a desk.

He could've said "not bad" about her, too, but he didn't want to be rude. "Hello," he said instead.

The dark-haired woman looked up in surprise. "Good morning," she said as she got up. "How may I help you?"

He returned her smile. "I'm looking for Cliff Ledbetter. Is he available?"

"Yes, of course. He's at the corral just behind the house."

"Thanks." He turned to go out the front door.

"It's closer if you go out the back door. Just go down the hall behind the main staircase."

"Thank you. I will." As he walked down the hall, he smiled at the thought of the remarkably beautiful woman in the front of-

fice. Getting to know her would be his first priority.

Right after he moved in.

After the stranger had walked away, Jessica sat back down at her desk. Who could the man be? Her grandfather didn't have that many callers, other than his friends from the valley, and she knew all of them. Besides, they all dressed in jeans and boots, not in what looked like a custom-tailored designer suit and leather loafers.

The man was more her age than her grandfather's. Not that she was looking for a man right now, good-looking or not.

"Jessie? Where are you?"

She recognized her brother's growl. "I'm at my desk, Pete. What's wrong?"

"This can't be true!" he ranted as he came around the corner.

"What can't be true?"

"This cattle drive you offered the customers!"

"Pete, don't you remember? We talked about it."

"Not this week! We're doing roundup! I can't have a bunch of inexperienced rid-

ers wandering around on horseback! It's not safe."

After shuffling papers, Jessica asked, "Is this the only week you can do roundup? Because I have a larger group of guests requesting a cattle drive next week. It's what we do, Pete. Show people how to be a cowboy."

"I don't think we'll be finished by next week."

Jessica covered her face with her hands. Then she looked up. "Pete, this is why we had those meetings when we were planning out the summer season—to schedule certain activities for our paying customers."

"That's not my fault! I had a lot on my mind!"

Jessica was so frustrated with her oldest brother she was tempted to scream. "Pete, you're not thinking! Our reputation will depend on what people say about their time here!"

"Hey, kids, I want you to meet someone," an older voice called out, interrupting their tirade.

Jessica halted the argument mid-stride, but it wasn't easy. She looked up to see the dark-eyed stranger she'd admired before walking with their grandfather. She managed a smile.

“This is James Bradford. He’s going to work here.”

Jessica stared at the man, momentarily speechless.

Pete obviously wasn’t. “He is? You a cowboy?”

“I was at one time. Going to be again,” the man said.

Jessica finally found her voice. “Granddad, what do you mean?”

“Jim is Tony’s nephew. He’ll be great.”

“Who’s Tony?” Jessica asked. She didn’t mean to be rude, but she needed the facts.

“He’s the guy I go fishing with down in Texas. Remember? We were in the navy together.”

Holding her smile in place when she wanted to scream, she nodded at the man. Pete just stood there stone-faced.

“What are you good at?” Pete asked, still eyeing him.

James Bradford remained silent.

Both Pete and Jessica stared at their grandfather.

“You’re not going to like this, but I hired Jim to run the ranch. You all will report to him,” Cliff Ledbetter said.

Dead silence filled the room. Then both

Pete and Jessica started to protest, loudly, to their grandfather.

Mr. Bradford raised a hand and calmly said, “May I suggest we take this discussion somewhere that the guests can’t overhear?”

Guiltily, Jessica looked around. He was right, of course, but she didn’t like a stranger pointing out the obvious.

“Let’s go to the kitchen,” she said.

She knew their chef, Mary Jo, who had gone to school with her, would be in her room. They had a window of about an hour before lunch preparations began.

Abandoning her desk, Jessica marched toward the kitchen, listening to the purposeful footsteps that followed her.

When she could stand it no more, she whirled around and faced her grandfather. “Granddad, how could you do this?”

“I did it for you, child,” her grandfather said, but before Pete could complain, he added, “and for your brothers.”

“But, Granddad, we have it all arranged,” Jessica said, even as a hundred different problems that had come up in the past few months popped into her head.

“And is everything working out?”

“Well, not exactly, but—”

“Hell, no, it’s not working!” Pete answered.

Before she could question him, she heard her name being screamed in the hallway.

She swallowed. Great. Another temper to deal with!

“We’re in the kitchen, Hank,” she called out to her middle brother.

“I can’t believe you—” Hank abruptly halted, his mouth still open, when he realized she wasn’t alone. “What’s going on here?”

“Granddad just hired this *dude* to be our boss,” Pete said precisely, leaving no doubt to his opinion.

Mr. Bradford stepped up. “Look, this is the reason your grandfather hired me. He said the three of you are always arguing about everything. That must be hard on all of you. But if I’m the bad guy, then you won’t have to fight among yourselves.”

“But—but you’re a dude!” Hank complained, using the phrase that described their non-cowboy guests. People who knew nothing about cattle or horses.

“Give me a few minutes to change, and at least I won’t look like one,” Jim said with a crooked grin.

Jessica found herself captivated by that

grin. Then she shook her head, trying to rid herself of the thought.

“You don’t think I can pull it off?” he asked, catching her smile.

“No, I wasn’t— I mean, I was thinking of something else.” She hoped she didn’t blush.

“We got one of the bedrooms in the back hallway still empty, don’t we, Jessie?” her grandfather asked.

“Yes, but—”

“Good. Come on, Jim. I’ll show you where to put your stuff.”

“My bags are still in my car, Cliff.”

“Where are your keys? The boys can bring them in.”

“Why don’t I go grab everything and change clothes. Then I’ll see what I can do to put out some fires.”

“Good, good, that will be great,” Cliff said, nodding while he proclaimed his approval.

As soon as Jim left, the battle ensued. Both of her brothers were yelling at her, her grandfather was yelling at her brothers, and Jessica just gave up.

They were all still mourning the sudden deaths of their parents six months ago in a car accident. After the shock had worn off, they’d made plans to keep on with the cattle

operation, while continuing to run a working ranch, but to add a dude ranch to bring in extra income. They had all thought the Lazy L had a better chance of surviving when the price of beef went down as it sometimes did. But the stress of the transition was wearing on all of them.

Their grandfather actually owned the four-hundred-acre ranch. It had been in the family for three generations. Many years ago, though, he'd moved into town and left his son and his daughter-in-law to run it. When they died, Cliff returned to the ranch to ensure that everything went well.

Only it hadn't.

When Jim returned to the kitchen with his bags, Jessica got up and showed him the way to his bedroom. Anything to get away from her brothers.

"Are you about to cry?" he asked the moment they shut the kitchen door behind them.

"No!" she snapped.

He said nothing till they reached his room. "I'll be out as soon as I change."

Realizing he was waiting for her to go, she marched out of the room, after telling him where the employee bathrooms were.

But she didn't want to go back to the

kitchen and fight with her brothers. They were hurting, too, she knew. None of them had taken the time to mourn their parents' deaths.

Ever since that horrible tragedy, the three of them hadn't been able to get along. They had fought constantly the past six months. It amazed her that they had gotten as far as they had.

The door behind her opened and she spun around, surprised to see how much a change of clothes had changed Jim. Before, the man had looked like a Wall Street big shot. Now, in jeans, boots and a western shirt, he looked like a real cowboy. A handsome cowboy, she admitted.

"Let's go," he said, putting his hand on her elbow to guide her back to the kitchen. "I'll try to get this mess sorted out as quickly as possible."

She shrugged off his touch. "Don't think it'll be easy! We're all stubborn."

"No kidding," he muttered.

She looked at him sharply. "What's *that* supposed—"

"Let's just go to the kitchen."

When they entered, Hank and Pete were

still arguing. Her grandfather was watching them with a frown.

“Enough already,” Jim yelled, so he could be heard over the two of them.

They turned and stared at him.

“Now you look like a cowboy,” Pete said.

“Yeah,” Hank said, actually agreeing with his brother.

“I’ve worked as a cowhand and acted as boss on a cattle ranch in Texas. Now, let’s get down to business. What problems do you have right now?”

Both brothers started at the same time. Jim lifted his hand again. “One at a time.”

“Pete always gets to go first because he’s the oldest and that’s not fair!” Hank immediately said.

Pete retorted. “Hey, I’m the—”

“This time Hank can go first,” Jim said.

Hank gave a nod, satisfied. “Well, we have people who think they’re expert riders and they don’t even know to mount their horses on the left side! I can’t put those people on our best horses!”

“You should have a stable of mostly tame horses that won’t get upset if they’re mounted on the wrong side. That said, though, you

should be directing the riders to mount from the left. Do you?”

“Well, yeah, but I still wouldn’t call them great riders,” Hank protested.

“No one said you would. But you don’t have to be absolutely honest with your customers. What you want to do is find horses that are comfortable around a lot of people.”

“Yeah, I got those.”

“Good. Let me know if you run into problems.”

“Okay.”

Jim turned to Pete, who started in immediately.

“*She* expects me to have the guests wandering around when I’m trying to run a roundup!”

Jessica wanted so badly to step into the argument, but she wasn’t going to. First she’d wait for Bradford’s decision.

“Did you have a meeting to discuss your plans for the next week?” Jim asked Pete.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t listening because— Well, just because.” Pete’s argument sounded lame to Jessica.

Jim turned to her. “Did you explain to your brother what you expected from him?”

“Yes, I did. Specifically.”

“What did you promise?”

“We advertised our ranch as a working ranch, meaning we have cowboys and cows. I promised four people they could ride with the cowboys for several days.”

“You didn’t promise they would be involved in roping and branding?”

“No.”

“Pete, could you use the four people to hold the herd as you sort out the ones with calves?”

“I could, but I don’t see why I should!”

“Because if I’m in charge, you have to do as I say. I’m not being unreasonable, you know.”

“I know, but—”

“Pete!” Cliff Ledbetter said.

“But, Granddad!”

Once again, Cliff’s response was only his grandson’s name. “Pete!”

“Okay, okay!” Pete exclaimed, and marched out, still irritated.

“Now, for you, Jessica,” Jim began.

“I don’t have any problems, now that they aren’t yelling.” She raised her chin, just in case he thought he’d revamp her job, too.

“Actually, I think you do. If you’re going to make this a topflight dude ranch, you have to be out there with your guests. You need to

hire someone to do the clerical and receptionist duties.”

“But I can—”

“I don’t think the ranch can succeed with all of you arguing about every little thing,” he said gravely.

“But there’s no way we’ll succeed if the books aren’t balanced!” She looked at him, challenging him to disagree with her.

“That’s true. But still, someone else could do that while you’re being the face of this company. If you’re moving among the guests, you’ll make them feel important.”

“But I don’t have anyone to handle my regular job.”

“I’m sure we can find someone. I’ll supervise that person and make sure everything is running satisfactorily.”

Jessica turned to her grandfather, her eyes imploring his help.

But she received the same answer her brothers had. “Jessie, you have to do what Jim says. If you don’t, then this idea will ruin all of you. That’s why I hired him to come take charge. To save you.”

“Oh, Granddad,” Jessica said with a sigh.

“Go on, Jessie, go mingle with the guests,” Cliff said.

She walked out of the kitchen just as Mary Jo walked in.

“Hello,” she said, and batted her lashes at the stranger.

“Mary Jo, here is your new boss,” Cliff said.

Mary Jo did a double take. “But what about Jessica?”

“He’s her new boss, too.”

Mary Jo took another look, a measuring one before she stuck out her hand. “Hi, I’m Mary Jo Michaels.”

“Hello, I’m Jim Bradford, the new manager. And you’re the chef?”

She smiled. “Yes, I am.”

“What kind of meals are you serving the guests?”

“Jessica and I plan the menu.” She turned to a shelf and pointed out to him a chalkboard menu.

After studying it, he said, “Nice job. Don’t you need help to prepare them?”

“Yes,” she said, and looked at her watch. “I have four helpers who should arrive in five minutes.”

“Good. I’ll talk with you later, after I’ve had lunch,” Jim said with a smile.

Mary Jo smiled back. "I've never had any complaints."

"Good. Let me ask you a question. What would be the best way to advertise for someone for the front desk?"

"On the bulletin board at the grocery store in Steamboat."

He nodded. Then he headed toward the desk, the one Jessica had been occupying earlier, followed by Cliff.

"What do you think?" Cliff asked.

"I think you were right."

"Which part?"

"The part where you said they would destroy themselves and the ranch if they continued on as they are."

"I knew it," Cliff agreed with a sigh.

"Don't worry. I think you called me at the right time. And it was the right time for me, too. I've been away from the land for too long."

"Glad to hear it, son. I promised your uncle I'd do right by you, though we can't match the salary you gave up."

"No, I didn't think you could, but I've put back money and made some investments to carry me for a while. Your offer of ten per-

cent of the ranch, as well as a salary, is more than generous.”

“Okay. Now what?”

“I’m going to look around. Can you go put up a sign at the grocery store advertising for a receptionist with some bookkeeping skills?”

“Don’t need to. I know someone.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she’s a widow and needs the money. Used to work as a bookkeeper a few years ago.”

“Great. Call her and then let me know. Here’s my cell phone number.” He wrote it down and handed the paper to Cliff.

“Thanks, Jim.”

Jim enjoyed a nonchalant stroll out to the corral. The pace here was certainly different from his old job on the stock market in New York. And so was the air. He drew in a deep breath.

He climbed up to sit on the top rail and watch some cowboys instruct new riders.

There were several other cowboys sitting on the rail. He introduced himself and asked a few questions, till he heard an unfriendly voice from behind him.

“Are you trying to find out what we’re doing wrong?”

He looked over his shoulder and found Jessica Ledbetter standing behind him, her legs apart, her arms akimbo.

“I wondered where you’d gone,” he said mildly.

Resentment still on her face, she climbed the rails and slung both legs over them to sit a short distance from him.

“I was just thinking—”

“I bet you were,” she said, interrupting him.

“You know, Jessica, things will go better if you don’t fight me.”

“I may have to do what you say, but that doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it.”

“But isn’t being out in the fresh air preferable to bookkeeping?”

“Sure, if that was all I had to worry about. But spending my day sitting on the rail of the corral won’t fix the books!”

“Your grandfather wants to hire a widow he knows.”

“Leslie Brown.”

“You know her?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course I know her. This is a small town. Besides, I think Granddad is in love with her. He wanted me to hire her, but I didn’t think we could afford to do that right

off. Anyway, Leslie isn't hurting for money. She wouldn't take the job."

"Your grandfather seems to think she will."

Jessica twisted her mouth but didn't say anything.

After a minute he tried again. "Can you show her what she'll need to know to understand your system?"

"Yes," she snapped.

"Hey, Jessica, look at me!" one of the children called out as the horse he was on was being led around the corral.

She smiled and waved back.

Jim looked at her and wondered if she'd ever smile at him the way she smiled at the boy. The grin lit up her face, put a sparkle in her eyes.

He had his answer almost at once as she turned and once again glared at him. He asked, "So you have no problem with Leslie working here?"

"We don't need her if I do the books."

"Don't you realize you are the most important person on the ranch? If you can be out here to recognize problems before they arise, everyone will be happier."

"I was already doing that!"

"You couldn't possibly notice things hap-

pening here in the corral while you were working on the books in the big house.”

“So what are *you* going to do?” she demanded.

“Basically the same as you. I’m going to look for little problems and try to fix them before they become big problems.”

Jessica ground her teeth and looked away from him. She didn’t want him to make her life easy. His being here meant she’d failed. She’d pored over their notes, their plans, their hopes. She’d examined every idea or request that had come in. She’d written wonderful letters to their future guests, not just sending them brochures.

And James Bradford thought he was going to waltz in and take over?

She jumped down from the fence. She needed some time on her own. With her head down, she walked from the corral, ignoring his question that followed her.

“Where are you going?”

She didn’t answer.