

twelve

Cade had gotten up before good daylight to take the horses to the pen a few miles down river. The trip there had been quick, riding Duke and leading the others, but the journey back had taken longer than he expected. He probably should have left Annalisa and the boys a note.

Too late to worry about that now, he thought, as he approached the camp. The smell of bacon and eggs frying made his mouth water. Annalisa had her back to him and once again, he was struck by her graceful movements. From the silence, he surmised the three boys were still asleep. She probably hadn't even realized he was gone.

His mischievous streak kicked into overdrive, and he tiptoed to his tent. He squatted down facing her and fastened the zipper loudly. She spun around to look at him, and he stood up and stretched.

"Good morning." He covered his mouth as if to yawn.

"Good morning, Sleepyhead. I've never known you to sleep so late."

"This fresh air does strange things to a person," Cade said.

"I guess."

"Hey!" Cade strove for a surprised tone. "Where are the horses?"

Annalisa looked up from the skillet. "Oh. I don't know. Maybe they got tired of hanging around." She bent over to dig in the satchel bag for something.

"Annalisa!" Cade couldn't keep the exasperation from his

voice. "Did you understand? I said the horses are gone."

"Yeah, I heard you." She barely glanced up from buttering bread.

He was stunned by her reaction, or lack thereof, to be more specific. Somehow he'd expected much, much more. "Don't you care about the horses?"

"Sure I do. As a matter of fact, why don't you go look for them? I'll save you some breakfast."

"Aargh. . ." He sat down in the lawn chair and shook his head. "I can't believe you. I thought you'd be worried."

"Worried?" She looked up and winked. "When I saw you on Duke leading the others away before dawn? What's to worry about?"

He sprang to his feet. "In all these years, my brothers have never gotten the best of me when I played a joke on them. But it didn't take you five minutes to have me ready to pull my hair out."

She threw back her long mane of hair and laughed. "I'm sorry for disappointing you."

Cade knew he should have been disappointed, but he was secretly delighted that she'd turned the tables on him. "That's okay. It had to happen sometime. Better you than Clint or Jake or especially Holt."

"I didn't do anything special, Cade. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

"I'm starting to think that's the secret of happiness." He realized again how thankful he was that she'd come along to his place at this particular time in his life.

Annalisa laid the food out on plates. "So, did you take the horses somewhere just to play an elaborate prank or is there a method to your madness?"

Cade glanced heavenward in mock despair. "Now, she's

interested.” They laughed together. “Actually, I had a reason. . . I was trying to make it easy on us. When we inflate the rafts and put all of our stuff in them, we can float down the river a few miles and the horses will be waiting for us in a pen at the end of the line.”

“There’s an ingenious idea. I guess I hadn’t really thought about what we’d do after we got downstream.”

“Good thing one of us thinks ahead,” he said.

She snorted. “Where would we be without you, Cade McFadden?”

“Is Mr. Cade going somewhere?” Tim’s voice sounded sleepy and a little fearful.

“No!” Cade held out his arms and the boy ran into his embrace. “Lord willing, I’m here to stay.” As he wrapped his arms around the child, he prayed that he could be a permanent fixture in Tim’s life. When he glanced up again at the smiling brunette, he couldn’t help but attach an addendum to the prayer.

He stood up and clasped Tim’s hand. “Let’s go wake up Juan and Matthew.” As they approached the tents, Cade held his finger to his lips. “Shh. . .” He squatted beside the tent and made a whistle sound. “Bob-white! Bob-white!”

Tim bit back a giggle.

“Somebody turn the volume down!” Juan’s groggy voice drifted out of the tent.

Cade, Tim, and Annalisa laughed so loudly that Juan unzipped the door, and, along with Matthew, stuck his head out.

“I guess we know who will be the last ones in the river,” Cade said.

Juan grabbed Matthew’s arm and pulled him back, then quickly zipped the tent door. Less than three minutes later, both boys emerged, fully clothed and grinning.

The boys made a much better audience than Annalisa had for Cade's missing horses gag, but before they could get upset, he reassured them. After eating a hasty breakfast, the campers broke camp and piled all the camping gear in a neat pile for George to retrieve later. They applied sunblock and aired up the small rubber rafts. Everyone but Tim had his or her own boat.

Social Services had assured him that all three boys were proficient swimmers, and he knew their life jackets were fastened tightly, but he still felt more comfortable keeping the youngest with him. His heart swelled when, instead of grumbling at the arrangements, Tim pumped his fist in the air with a big "Yahoo!"

Cade headed over to where Annalisa stood at the edge of the water. In a motion becoming familiar to him, she swooped up her mass of curls and swirled them into a twist, securing it with a big clippie thing. She then gave considerable attention to the fasteners on her life jacket.

"You nervous?"

She looked up. "Who me?"

"Uh-oh. I knew I should have asked other questions besides, 'Do you swim?' Is your swimming experience comparable to your horseback-riding experience?"

"Not hardly," she said, with a chuckle. "I really can swim. I'm even certified to rescue someone if need be."

"Then why are you triple-checking your life jacket fasteners?"

She offered a rueful grin. "I've never swum except in a pool. I'm a little apprehensive about rafting."

"This is nothing like you see on television. We'll be lucky if we see any white water at all. Holes of water where the speed of the water moderately increases are about all the rap-

ids we get on Fourche River.”

She looked thoughtfully out over the gently rolling water. “Let’s just call them not-quite-so-slows instead of rapids, okay? I think that would make me feel better.”

He laughed. “For you, Annalisa Davis—anything.”



The nose of the navy blue and red rubber raft dipped down in the water and scooped up a spray of cold liquid onto Annalisa. “Whoa!” Her stomach had dipped as well, but the sensation wasn’t entirely unpleasant, especially considering she’d managed to stay upright through the small rapid.

“Uh, Annalisa,” Cade called from his nearby raft. “‘Whoa’ only works with horses.”

“Now you tell me. Why didn’t you add that in with your little speech about technical things like going toward the open vees of water and avoiding the points of closed vees?”

“I guess it slipped my mind.”

She grinned at the picture he and Tim made—working together to keep the little boat moving. Juan and Matthew were in their own rafts on either side of Cade. She was bringing up the rear.

They’d come through three little areas of white water, but following Cade’s simple direction, no one had been in the water. From the way Juan continued to rock his boat, though, Annalisa figured the teen was ready to get wet.

Since she’d cleared the rapids, they set off again at a leisurely pace, floating through a wide, deep hole of water. The boys paddled, but Cade wouldn’t allow them to get too far ahead. They’d advance a little, then turn and paddle back upstream to reach the others.

Annalisa leaned back against the cushioned pillow of her raft. Gigantic leafy trees lined the banks of the river. Their

limbs almost interlocked in a canopy over the water, leaving only a small space of blue sky peeking out of the green foliage. She closed her eyes and soaked up the peace. Crickets sang up and down the banks, and the only other sound was the lapping of the water at the side of her boat and the occasional swish of Juan or Matthew's paddles in the water.

Drip, drip, drip. Frowning, she opened one eye. It was supposed to be sunny all day. The sky looked blue with only an occasional white cloud drifting by. But she had felt a light sprinkle. She glanced at Cade and Tim. They had their backs to her, seeming to be fascinated by a leaf floating in the water. Juan and Matthew were paddling over to take a look.

She closed her eyes again. Drip, drip, drip. She decided to ignore it. Suddenly, a huge splash of water landed in her face. She opened both eyes and jumped up to sitting. All the boys had their backs turned, but Cade's shoulders were shaking.

"Cade McFadden!" Her yell rang out through the bluffs.

He turned around, the picture of innocence, other than the grin that tugged at the corner of his handsomely chiseled mouth. "Yes?"

"Something about this river turns you into a kid, doesn't it?"

His grin burst forth, unrestrained. "Yes, Ma'am, I suppose it does. You think we've discovered the fountain of youth?"

Juan laughed and Tim joined in.

"I sincerely doubt it." In spite of her wet face and hair, she couldn't stay mad at him when he looked so boyish and relaxed. He'd carried the world on his shoulders far too long. "Why? Were you thinking I needed a double dose of the fountain of youth? Particularly on my face?"

"Now, Annalisa, you know better than that. You already look like a teenager."

"Are we almost back to the horses? Now this water's not

only affecting your actions but your eyesight, as well.”

“I beg to differ, but as a matter of fact, we have one more section of rapids up ahead, then we’ll be at the pen where the horses are.”

Juan and Tim groaned, and Matthew looked crestfallen.

“Aren’t you boys getting hungry?” Cade asked.

“No!”

“Huh-uh.”

“Tell you what,” Annalisa offered, “when we get to the horses, could the boys swim a bit while I fix the sandwiches?”

“Yeah!”

“YIPPEE!”

Cade grinned at her. “I suppose that wouldn’t hurt anything.”

The last rapid was upon them, and Cade and Tim prepared to lead the way. “Juan,” Cade called to the teen, who was still rocking his boat from side to side. “Let’s try to stay dry until we get to the swimming hole.”

Annalisa expected Juan to argue, but he neatly swooshed his raft through the white water and waited calmly beside Cade and Tim for her and Matthew. He’d definitely come a long way.

They all pulled their boats up to the shore, and the boys leaped out into the water. Annalisa was determined not to get wet, since she’d made it this far. She eased to standing. Cade reached out a hand to help her, but she didn’t step quite high enough to clear the tubed edge of the raft. Instead of leaping gracefully onto the beach, she tumbled into Cade’s arms.

“Look!” Tim’s high voice echoed across the water. “Annalisa trusts Mr. Cade.”

Cade, his face mere inches from hers and his arms around her tightly, raised one eyebrow. “Is that true?”

She felt heat creep up her cheeks. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

“I’m glad.” He gave her one quick squeeze and released her.

Heart thudding, she hurried up to the horses, with the others trailing behind her. The animals were glad to see them. Bubba, in particular, whinnied at Annalisa as she fixed the sandwiches. She was going to miss him when she went.

And he was the least of her heartaches. Suddenly, she realized Cade wasn’t the only one who’d let the river take his troubles for awhile. She hadn’t given one thought to leaving Circle-M while they were floating. Now that her feet were back on solid ground, and they were about to head back to the ranch, it was time to face the inevitable again.