

BRANDON'S BRIDE

by Lisa Gardner writing as Alicia Scott

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"If you love romantic suspense, don't miss Lisa Gardner's version. Intelligent, smart, and romantic."

—Jayne Anne Krentz

For years, Brandon Ferringer has sought to untangle the mystery surrounding his father's disappearance. Now training as a hotshot—a seasonal wildland firefighter—Brandon feels he's on the verge of finally discovering the truth. In need of temporary lodging, Brandon rents a room at a local farm, and he is surprised when his attraction to the ranch's alluring owner threatens to distract him from his mission.

Single mother Victoria Meese struggles to find time for herself in between raising her son, Randy, and running the Lady Luck Ranch. When she meets Brandon, she suddenly finds something to believe in again. But Brandon's search for answers is about to turn dangerous, threatening their growing connection—and their very lives.

Even with the real estate agent's directions, it took Brandon three tries to find the Lady Luck Ranch. The first time, he assumed the dirt trail splicing off from the main road was a forgotten forestry path. After driving another five miles, he turned and went back. Beaverville, Oregon, wasn't that big. Downtown was a collection of six weathered gray storefronts that could've been mistaken for a ghost town if not for the single golden pine addition gleaming on the corner.

Twenty-six people served, the dust-covered sign joked at the corner grocery deli. The new store turned out to be a cattle feed shop, its front porch and back loading docks buried beneath huge burlap bags of grain. Next to it, a hunting store boasted a dozen gleaming rifles in the windows and enough boxes of bullets to make the NRA proud. Next to it was a beat old saloon claiming to be Whiskey Jack's. *Two hundred and sixty* people served, its sign boasted.

Brandon got the impression Beaverville might be just slightly different from Manhattan.

He passed the high school. At first glance, he thought the simple three-story cabin was someone's home, but then he spotted the

football field next door and discerned the fallen two-hundred-year-old tree trunk with Beaverville High School branded into its bark. The town hadn't wasted much money on the slightly tottering school. On the other hand, the taxpayers took football seriously. The lines were freshly painted brilliant white, the wooden bleachers were carefully stained, and a decent-size snack bar advertised beer, hot dogs, and Tums, all for seventy-five cents apiece.

"Wonderful," Brandon murmured. "Let the good times roll." He'd spent the whole night on a red-eye flight and the whole morning driving. After four years of rigorous hiking in the vast outdoors, he'd developed a healthy loathing of confinement. He wanted to stretch his long, lean legs. He wanted to draw real air into his scratchy throat and feel fresh wind against his face. He wanted out of his car.

He headed down Highway 26. He still didn't see any signs of a ranch.

In another couple of weeks, these dry, barren fields would be covered in lush prairie grass and pink foxglove, all rimmed by the snowcapped mountains rising majestically in the horizon. Now, however, the landscape was arid and desolate, a stark compilation of tinder-dry sagebrush and persnickety prairie grass poking out of dusty red soil. One bolt of lightning, and the whole thing could burst into flame, walls of fire reaching two hundred feet high, sounding like a jet engine and racing eighty miles per hour. Deer would scatter and fall. Hundred-year-old oaks would burn so badly, their stumps would smolder well into November.

Brandon remembered it all vividly—the heat, the smell, the roaring sound, the bloodred sun, the unquenchable thirst. The enormous awe of seeing what nature could do. Boss Hoggins, the superintendent from

the White Mountains, had told Brandon that once a man saw a true wildland fire, he never was the same. Four years ago, Brandon had been in the flames. And Boss Hoggins was right—he'd never looked at Mother Nature the same way since.

Brandon hit the center of town again, scowled and turned around. "*The Lady Luck Ranch is just off the highway,*" the real estate agent had said. "*The only ranch around for miles. Just look for the sign. Can't miss it.*"

"Can't miss it," he mocked. "Can't miss it."

Brandon began to contemplate wringing the real estate agent's neck.

The dirt road loomed to his right again. Abruptly Brandon slammed on the brakes and brought the car to a grinding halt, his gaze glued to one of the more impressive examples of sagebrush. Funny, but that looked like a piece of wood tangled in those prickly limbs. Say, a sign.

Brandon climbed out of his car, thinned his lips impatiently and stalked toward the offending plant. Oh, yes, that was a sign, all right. The Lady Luck Ranch sign.

"Your mother was a cactus," he informed the bush coldly, picked up the sign and stuck it on the barbed-wire fence. He turned his red rent-a-wreck down the path. The car jostled over the overgrown dirt road hard enough to rattle his bones.

If he ever found this damn ranch, he was never getting into a car again.

The road wove around and around, gradually beginning to climb. The brush gave way to a thick grove of pine trees that blocked the stark sun. Abruptly, the ranch appeared.

A beat-up pickup truck, colored red by more rust than paint, sat in the circular dirt drive. The wooden cabin was small, the patio

dusted with yellow soil. Covered by a thick carpet of pine needles and moss, the roof sagged in one corner while the chimney crumbled dangerously. The front door had weathered differently from the rest of the house—a newer addition that already leaned on its hinges. The place obviously needed some work, and the neighboring stables didn't look much better.

But blue gingham curtains waved cheerily at the square windows. Planters rimming the patio offered red, pink and yellow tulips. Two brightly colored horse blankets were draped over the railings to dry. A rocking chair in one corner had a thick yellow-and-blue comforter draped over the back and looked well-used. What the place lacked in money, it made up in atmosphere. That was good enough for Brandon.

He climbed out of his car. He didn't see any sign of people, but an striped orange cat appeared, wrapping its purring form around his legs in a long procession of figure eights. After a minute, Brandon squatted to scratch the tomcat behind his ears.

“Do you know where I can find Victoria Meese?” he asked the cat, since it was all he had to work with.

The cat purred smugly, blinking wise gold eyes. C.J. used to have an orange cat named Speedy. For years, there was nothing the Marine could wear that wasn't covered in blond fur.

“How about renting me a room?” Brandon tried again. “I'll buy you only the best cat food and fill your litter box with shredded money. Why not? I haven't had much luck getting rid of the stuff any other way.”

The tomcat, no idiot, leaned against Brandon's leg and purred wholehearted approval.

“Big, stubborn . . .” A husky voice spat a string of curses into the silence, and Brandon rose instantly, searching for the source.

“Come on, into the corner. Move it. You little . . . I shoulda let them turn you into glue!”

Brandon followed the stream of disparaging words into the stables. The row of empty stalls gave way to the feed center. There, a blond woman in dusty Levi's and a torn plaid shirt was wrestling with a thousand-pound gelding and losing. She obviously wanted the big gray horse to back up into the covered arena attached to the stables. He obviously had no intention of doing any such thing.

“Would you like some help?” Brandon called.

She barely spared him a glance. “Nah. Doc doesn't like strangers. You step forward and he'll probably trample us both.”

Brandon looked at four hard hooves the size of salad plates. He didn't take another step. In the meantime, the woman took a firm hold of the reins and tugged down the gray's head.

“Hey, you,” she chastised. “Pay attention to me. Now move your big butt backward.” Her voice was deep and firm, the kind guaranteed to get immediate obedience from small children and dumb animals.

For emphasis, she leaned against the horse's shoulder, pushing him along. Her long, blunt-cut blond hair swept forward, liberally decorated with straw. On the reins, her dark, dusky hands were fisted, her forearms dark and strong, her fingernails dirty and short. Compact build. Nicely curved legs. A very capable woman. And an attractive one.

With a last oomph, she shoved the gray beast into the dusty arena and triumphantly slammed the gate shut. The horse pawed the ground a few times, then shook his mane as if to say, “Well, I never!”

“Next time, I will turn you into glue.” Shaking her head, she

brushed off her hands, picked up her gloves and turned toward Brandon.

“So what can I help you with?” She pinned him with a direct blue gaze that brought his intelligence to an immediate halt. He’d never seen eyes that color before, not blue, not gray, but somewhere in between. Bright, vivid, intelligent eyes. Riveting, clear, honest eyes.

“Hello?” she quizzed.

Brandon shut his gapping mouth. “Ah, are you Victoria Meese?”

She chewed on a piece of hay jutting out of the corner of her mouth, appearing slightly wary. “Who wants to know?”

“I’m here about the rental. An agency in Redmond told me about it.”

“Oh, that.” She relaxed instantly, picked up two hay hooks and matter-of-factly stabbed them into a bale. The movement drew his eyes to her denim-clad legs again. “Got a one-room cabin out back,” she said as she hefted the bale. “Not much to it, but it’s clean and furnished. It was meant as quarters for a foreman or stable manager, but the Lady Luck Ranch isn’t that lucky these days.”

She dumped the bale on the ground and with two short jerks snapped the baling wire, then began peeling off leaves of alfalfa. “The cabin’s a hundred dollars a month. It doesn’t have its own bathroom or kitchen, but there’s a bathroom in the stables and I fix breakfast every morning. If you’re looking for luxury, this isn’t it. But it’s a sturdy little place, the bed’s comfortable, and spring around here is worth seeing. Are you interested?”

“I don’t require luxury,” he told her honestly. She was walking down the center aisle, depositing bundles of alfalfa to the four waiting horses as she went. At the last stall, the horse blew softly into her hair, scattering hay. She smiled at the oversize beast and patted his shoulder.

"The lease agreement is simple," she called to Brandon. "Just pay me one month up front and give me four weeks' notice before you move. I'll need you to fill out some forms—name, permanent address, employment, Mr. . . ."

"Ferringer. Brandon Ferringer."

"What brings you to these parts, Mr. Ferringer?"

"I am a hotshot," he said quietly.

"What?" She straightened abruptly against the stall, startling her horse and apparently herself. "*You're* the last hotshot?"

Beaverville didn't have much, but from spring to fall, it was the premiere spot for training and deploying hotshots around the country. When the big wildland fires broke out, the Smokejumpers parachuted into the hard-to-reach areas and launched the first wave of attack. The hotshots followed like ground-force Marines, hiking through rugged terrain with twenty-five pounds of equipment on their backs, clearing the brush, digging the fire trenches and working, working, working while the roaring flames stained their faces black.

"I'm going to be a hotshot," Brandon agreed, confused by her reaction. She still looked flustered.

"*You're* the hero from New York?"

"I'm . . . I'm from New York." Hero? How had that got out?

Victoria was waving a hand as if to clear the air. "Sorry. I'm making a mess of this. I know all about the hotshots, you see. My brother Charlie also made the crew. Beaverville's team is only eighteen people, and with sixteen returnees, only two slots opened up. Charlie got one, and according to the rumor mill, some hero from New York got the second."

"Oh," Brandon said with feeling. He'd forgotten about the rumor mill. The forestry service was notoriously cliquish, with

everyone knowing everyone and talking about everyone. Except for Brandon. He was officially the outsider in a world unaccustomed to outsiders.

Victoria was giving him a frank up and down. "If you don't mind me saying, you're not what we expected. For starters, you should be ten years younger."

"I'm thirty-six."

"That old? Charlie's twenty-two."

Brandon made a face. "They're probably all kids, aren't they?"

"Hardly a soul over twenty-eight," she assured him. "But then, none of them can say they rescued two kids in the middle of a blowout."

"It was luck."

"Really? I'd say taking on a wildland fire in the Presidential range was less about fortune and more about a death wish."

Brandon didn't comment. That fire had happened only six months after Julia's funeral, so she might very well have a point

"Well," Victoria said when it became apparent he wasn't going to elaborate, "that must have been some experience, Brandon Ferringer, because Superintendent Coleton Smith hates to take outsiders onto his crew, but he accepted you. Two hundred applications for that slot, men he knows and has personally worked with on the district crews, and he chose you."

Brandon smiled wanly. "I'm in good shape, even for an old guy."

A wry gleam suddenly appeared in Victoria Meese's clear gaze. "Oh, I won't argue that." She gave him a sudden flashing grin. "Boy, you are going to have a fun summer. Come on, hotshot. I'll show you the cabin."

True to Victoria's description, the cabin wasn't much. Built as a miniature of the main house, it had the same aging roof. Inside,

however, he found a decent-size room that was well-maintained and smelled of lemon wax. The furniture was old, probably garage sale bargains, but Victoria had done her best with it. A hand-sewn blue gingham slipcover brightened up the couch, while an old blue-and-green quilt decorated the double bed. The cabin didn't offer a kitchen, but an old yellow counter against the back wall provided a sink and an outlet for a hot pot. Mostly, the small quarters offered a stunning view of the back pasture framed by the mountains. Dappled with sunlight, two newborn foals kicked and frolicked close to their mothers' protective forms.

"What do you think?" She rested against the doorjamb, her arms crossed over her chest, her gaze patient as he inspected the room.

"It's perfect, Victoria."

"Please, call me Vic. Only my mother calls me Victoria. And my brothers when they're trying to get my goat."

"A lot of brothers?" he guessed.

"Six. Three older, three younger. I didn't exactly grow up playing with dolls."

"But you had the best arm on the Little League team?"

She grinned unabashedly. "Exactly. Listen, I'm happy you're interested in the place, but there are a few things you should know." She straightened in the doorway and suddenly got down to business. Brandon waited obediently.

"My father is the sheriff around here," she said levelly. "You might as well know that, because he's going to conduct the background check from hell on you. In Beaverville, we don't have any secrets."

"I don't have anything to hide."

"Okay. Two, I have an eight-year-old son."

"Pardon?" She didn't look a day older than twenty-six.

"I'm twenty-seven," she said crisply, as if reading his thoughts. "That makes it no less stupid, but a little more legal—"

"It's none of my business—"

"Damn right. But for the record"—she took a deep breath and spoke more quietly—"I have a great son. A fabulous kid, and I really want to keep him that way. So, while this place is yours, I do ask that you set a good example. No drunken, disorderly, loud parties. No, um, well, women."

He said, "I'm a thirty-six-year-old widower. I'm not exactly into wild parties, and don't worry about women."

"Oh." Her expression softened instantly as people's always did when he said he was a widower. At least Victoria's gaze didn't look pitying. Her blue eyes had merely gentled in a philosophic, understanding sort of way.

"That's hard," she said.

"It was a tough time."

"Well." Her tone became brisk. "That brings me to the last consideration. My ex-husband didn't die—he went to jail for two years for dealing dope. I got a restraining order against him, but he was paroled last week, and sooner or later, he'll come around."

"You think he'll try to kidnap your son?"

"Ronald?" She shook her head vehemently. "Oh, no, he has no interest in parenting. It's money he wants. My father is keeping as much an eye on him as possible, but if you see a dark-haired man around here, feel free to grab a shotgun. My brothers are all blond, and they're the only men who should ever set foot on this property. I'm sorry, but don't keep anything of value in your cabin. I can't run a ranch and sit guard on the house, and if Ronald does come by . . ." She shrugged, and that pretty much said it all. "There you go, Ferringer. All dirty laundry is on the line."

"And it's quite an impressive assortment," he said respectfully.

"Not bad for a twenty-seven-year-old, huh? So tell me, Ferringer, are you interested in the place?"

"The cabin is perfect."

"Really?" She sounded genuinely shocked, then caught herself. "Huh. I'm not sure if that makes you crazy, or just nice enough to have around." She glanced at him again, more contemplatively this time, and suddenly, something in the air simply caught.

Brandon's gut got a rolling, tight feel he hadn't experienced in a long, long time. His breathing grew shallow. He became hyperaware of the smear of dust of her high cheekbone and the way her red lips parted in shock.

He was startled. She was startled. And damn, for a moment he did want to cross the room, encircle her waist . . .

Brandon cleared his throat. Victoria quickly looked away. "Um. We're all set, then?" he asked.

"Huh. Hmm. Well," she said, and took a deep breath. "I'm gonna fetch the paperwork," she announced abruptly. "My father will check you out ASAP."

"Fine." He still sounded hoarse. "Um . . . may I borrow the bathroom in the stables to clean up? I've been traveling since eight o'clock last night."

"Oh. Sure. Need anything?"

"I'm fine. Thank you."

"Okay." She pushed away from the doorjamb hastily, and they were both happy for the distance. "My son will be home from baseball practice around six," she called as she headed for the steps. "You'll know when he arrives by the sound of the earth shaking."

"Got it."

She made it halfway down the steps, then halted. He was staring.

He had the tingling feeling along his spine again. He found himself leaning forward.

She turned abruptly. “Would you like to join Randy and me for dinner? If the security check works out, of course. It’s . . . it’s always good for everyone to know their neighbors.”

“Neighbors. Of course. That would be nice. It is good to know your neighbors.”

“Yeah. Neighbors. See you around seven.” She took off and disappeared inside the house. He finally expelled the breath he’d been holding. Belatedly, he shook his head as if that would rattle his thoughts into order.

It wasn’t like him to react in such a way to a woman. It just wasn’t. And yet here he was, struggling for a second breath.

From the day he was born, Brandon had been different. Other children laughed; other children played; other children invented wild, nonsensical games. Not Brandon. He’d been quiet, somber and unbearably aware of the tension in his family. His most vivid memory of his father was Max striding out the front door saying, “Time to deal, time to deal.”

Max hadn’t dealt well. He’d squandered the family estate, cheated on Brandon’s mother and left behind a legacy of bitterness. And from the time he could walk, Brandon had known it was his job to fix things. He was the older son. He needed to make things right.

He went to Wharton on a scholarship and graduated with honors. Then he worked hundred-and-twenty-hour weeks on Wall Street for money, money, money. He bought back the family estate when he was twenty-five. He built the perfect *GQ* life. He did everything he thought he was supposed to do. And his mother informed him he was just like his father—a cold, materialistic workaholic.

There was nothing in Brandon's life to prove her wrong.

The thought banked the last of the embers in his mind, and his shoulders tightened with a familiar tension. He should go jogging. In the last four years, he'd discovered that if he ran far enough, fast enough, hard enough, sometimes he could escape his demons.

Instead, he stood silently on the wooden porch in spring-filled Oregon and thought of Julia and how she'd looked in that ridiculously short pink waitress uniform the first time he'd met her. She'd been so flustered, she'd poured steaming coffee onto his silk tie. Then she'd started to laugh as she'd tried valiantly to repair the damage. Then, somehow, he'd started laughing, too. Stuffy Brandon Ferringer giggling over coffee spilled on his two-hundred-dollar tie.

He'd never realized how much Julia had brought into his sterile existence until she'd died. He'd never realized how much she made him laugh until he was alone in the silence.

He'd never realized how much he'd loved her and how little he'd given her until he stood at her grave and realized his mother was right. He was like his father. He'd married a woman, he'd loved a woman and he'd given her nothing of himself.

More than C.J., more than Maggie, Brandon was Maximillian the Chameleon's child.

Later, after a long, hot shower and a badly needed nap, Brandon unpacked his single duffel bag while a spring sunset washed the world with shades of gold. In the distance, Victoria called to her horses. Her son arrived home with a high-spirited roar of greeting and the sharp snap of the screen door slapping shut.

Brandon removed the sweatshirts and jeans from his duffel bag, piling them onto the quilt until he came to the waterproof pouch tucked securely in the bottom. He opened it slowly and carefully

placed its precious contents on the bed—the heart-shaped locket Maggie had received from their father and a slim, bound blue book titled *Tillamook High School, 1955*. The locket contained the portrait of a beautiful woman no one could identify. The high-school yearbook offered pictures of Max with his two best friends and business partners, Al Simmons and Bud Irving.

After four years of investigating, these were the only clues Brandon had to his father's enigmatic life and death, as well as a mysterious phone call C.J. had received six months ago from a voice he didn't recognize. The caller had wanted to exchange information of Max's life in return for C.J. backing off a case. C.J. being C.J., he had said no.

We've been watching you for a long time, the voice had said. You're almost as good as your father. You're just a little too straight.

Had Maximillian been involved in something illegal? Had Max's plane crash in Indonesia been accidental? *Was Maximillian even dead?* Twenty-five years later, his body had never been found.

Footsteps came running up the wooden porch in rapid staccato, sounding like a thundering bull. Brandon moved quickly, sliding the yearbook and locket beneath his mattress just as Randy Meese's small, wiry form filled the doorway.

Randy had his mother's blond hair covering his head like an unruly mop. It might have been carefully combed once, but now strands stuck out in every direction as befit an energetic, sports-crazy, horse-crazy eight-year-old boy. His face was liberally covered with freckles and he was missing one front tooth. The gapped smile fit him.

He rolled back on his battered sneakers, stuck his grubby hands through the loops of his faded, dust-covered jeans and gave the new guy a thorough once-over.

"Huh," Randy declared at last, his voice high-pitched. "I'm supposed to invite you to dinner." He scowled fiercely so Brandon would know Randy was still contemplating extending the invitation.

"I see," Brandon said, and waited patiently.

Randy wriggled against the doorway, using the doorjamb to get at an itch on his back. His red flannel shirt was brand-new, uncomfortable and two sizes too big so he could grow into it. From what he understood, his father was a decent-size man, so he had a solid future of growing ahead of him. Good thing, too. It was hard to be intimidating as the man of house when you were only four feet tall. Randy was strong, though, and tough. His baseball coach called him fierce.

"Mom says you're gonna be a hotshot," Randy stated. He narrowed his eyes like Clint Eastwood did when interrogating bad guys.

"That's right."

"You're too old," Randy said flatly. Jimeeny, the guy was *at least* thirty, definitely one step from the grave.

"That seems to be the consensus," Brandon agreed.

"What's 'consensus'?"

"Um, it means other people have said the same."

"Then why are you doing it? My uncle Charlie says only the leanest, meanest bast—uh, guys are fit to be hotshots. You're just old."

Brandon did his best not to wince. "Yes, I think we've covered that. But for the record, I've done a thing or two."

"Like what?"

Brandon contemplated the boy. He recognized the intense look, the determination to be tough. Randy was the eight-year-old man in the family. Brandon respected that.

Brandon squatted. He spoke man-to-man. "I've gone scuba diving in open seas."

"That's just water."

"I've hiked the volcanoes of Indonesia. The ground shakes and pops beneath your feet. You have to watch your step. One wrong move, the hot lava bursts beneath you and sprays sulfur all over your legs."

Randy appeared slightly more interested. "Oozing rocks, huh?"

"I've done peak bagging," Brandon said sagely. "Do you know what peak bagging is?"

"Peak bagging? What's a peak? Does it have fangs? Does it growl? Can it tear you limb from limb?"

"Not quite. A peak is the top of a mountain. The very tippy top most people never see. You know how early explorers—"

"Lewis and Clark."

"Yes, Lewis and Clark. They went into hard, brutal terrain most people would never attempt to cross. Peak bagging is like that. You hike up tough mountains and rough trails most people wouldn't be able to handle. You have to be in a great shape, have strong legs, good lungs. You have to be willing to keep climbing even when your whole body wants to stop.

"Then, when you reach the top of the peak, you've bagged it. Some people bag the different peaks of the Appalachian Trail. Some people try to bag the fourteen-thousand-foot peaks around the globe. Then there are peaks over twenty thousand feet high, so tall and so cold, you have to bring your own oxygen."

"Have you done twenty-thousand-foot peaks?"

"Yes," Brandon said quietly. "Everest,"

"*Mount Everest!*" Randy's eyes went saucer-wide. "Did you make it to the *top*?"

“Not quite. The weather took a turn for the worse. But we were close.”

“What was it like? Did it hurt? Was it hard?”

“The hardest thing I’ve ever done,” Brandon said honestly. “And it was the most beautiful place in the world. Everest is twenty-nine thousand and twenty-eight feet tall, give or take ten feet because of snow. Up that high, the whole world is thick and white and the sun glints blue off the ice caps. It’s like walking on top of the world, through the clouds.”

“I bet it was dangerous,” Randy said shrewdly.

“It was dangerous.”

“Did people die?”

Brandon hesitated. “It was dangerous.” Two men in their team had died. Sometimes, Brandon still dreamed of the men’s frozen blue faces and wide-open eyes. Sometimes, he dreamed that they were him.

“Keewl,” Randy drawled breathlessly. “Wait till I tell Mom!”

He leapt off the porch, went racing pell-mell across the yard, then came to a skittering halt that churned up plumes of red dust “You’re supposed to come, too,” he called. “It’s dinner!”

“Oh,” Brandon said, having not understood that part. He straightened slowly, feeling suddenly hesitant about approaching the main house and sitting down with Randy and Victoria. It would be such a cozy scene. Homey, comfortable. Those were things Brandon hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

“Hurry up!” Randy yelled from across the yard. His impatient look clearly stated that if they didn’t eat absolutely, positively *now*, the food would magically disappear and they would both starve. Brandon got moving.

Randy scurried up to the front porch, then waited, propping open

the door with his hip and working the laces of his sneakers. “No shoes in the house.”

“All right.” Brandon removed his worn hiking boots and placed them side by side by the door. Randy tossed his tennis shoes in two different directions. One landed beneath the rocking chair.

“Gotta wash up before dinner. Do the back of your neck. Mom checks.”

“I see.”

Randy led him to the utility room just inside the door. A big old metal sink, rimmed with eight kinds of disinfectants and cleansers, loomed. Randy took up a position on the right side. Brandon went left. They stood shoulder to shoulder, preparing for battle.

“The trick is to lather up good,” Randy informed him. “Specially ’cause then you smell like soap, and if you smell like soap, she won’t look so hard.”

“Good point.”

Randy scrubbed his face so hard, his freckles should’ve come off. Then he passed the lumpy bar of soap, and Brandon lathered up. Under Randy’s watchful gaze, he washed the back of his neck, too, finally earning the boy’s nod of approval.

Victoria found them a moment later, Randy hunched over the sink, his face soapy and water sticking his oversize red shirt to his thin shoulders and bony little-boy’s frame. Beside him, Brandon filled out the room with the unmistakable form of a man. Wet spikes of hair rimmed his crinkled blue eyes. Beads of water trailed down the smooth line of his square-cut jaw and dampened his blue chambray shirt. His lean fingers gripped the soap, squishing white suds across the back of his bronzed skin and drawing her gaze to the rippling strength of his forearms.

“Oh, my,” she whispered, stomach tightening. She’d told herself

the moment in the cabin had been a product of her imagination. Obviously she'd lied, because here was Brandon Ferringer, damp and soapy, and heaven help her, she was growing warm all over.

Her son was looking at her curiously. She whisked herself to attention. "I mean, oh, my, it looks like you're both ready for dinner."

Randy promptly thrust out his hands and face. "I'm washed up! Time to eat."

"I smell like soap," Brandon said modestly.

"You put on a new shirt," Randy accused Victoria shrewdly. "Why'd y'change your shirt?"

Uh-oh, she was busted. She'd hoped her son wouldn't notice, but fat chance of that. Like any good eight-year-old, Randy only ignored things that could be used against him in a court of law. She squirmed beneath her own child's gaze, twisting the hem of her shirt. The shirt wasn't much, just an old plaid shirt like the rest of her wardrobe. Of course, it was lavender and she'd been told it highlighted her eyes, but that had nothing to do with it.

Her son was still staring at her, astute enough to make Torquemada proud. "Uh, my other shirt had hay on it," she tried.

"Your shirts always have hay on them."

"Gee, you're all washed up. Why don't you go sit at the table now?"

"Okay!" The promise of food sent Randy bolting from the room. Child rearing was definitely ten percent skill, ninety percent blatant bribery.

Victoria turned toward Brandon, hoping she looked natural, figuring she probably didn't. Ferringer, on the other hand, looked great. When he'd arrived this afternoon, he'd looked too grim, worn around the edges. Now, however, his shoulders were down; his face was relaxed. She'd recognize her son's handiwork anywhere.

“Isn’t he something?” she said.

“I like him,” Brandon said promptly, and looked a little dazed. Yep, Randy had that effect on people.

She began to relax, but when Brandon took a step forward, she inhaled instinctively, and her pulse skittered out of control. Lord help her, he did smell like soap. Good, strong, spicy, manly soap. She swore it didn’t smell like that on her brothers.

“Thank you for the dinner invite, Victoria. Generally I just eat alone.”

“No problem,” she said in a voice that was two octaves too high, then dug her fingernails into her palm. Dammit, she was too old and too sensible for this. Sure Brandon Ferringer was a good-looking man in that rugged, outdoorsy sort of way, but she had a ranch to run and a son to raise. She was beyond the stage of being easily impressed by the male half of the species. Now, if he knew how to train horses, rebuild a ranch or grow money on trees . . .

“Mom!” Randy wailed from the kitchen. She smiled. Oh, yeah, hers was the glamorous life.

“That’s our paging system,” she informed Brandon.

“Highly effective.”

“Oh, you haven’t heard anything yet. Let’s eat.”

“Wonderful.” He fell in step beside her. “I’m really looking forward to this, Victoria,” he said somberly. “I washed the back of my neck, you know.”