

BRANDED

Whitehorse Montana, Chisholm Cattle Company, Book 1 of 6

CHAPTER 1

Emma Chisholm heard the ruckus from clear back in the ranch kitchen. She wiped her hands on her apron as she walked toward the front of the sprawling house to peer out over the wide porch to the yard.

After a whirlwind courtship and marriage, she hadn't been prepared for her new home. Hoyt had warned her that his ranch was in the middle of nowhere, Montana but she hadn't been able to imagine anything this isolated or this sprawling.

She remembered thinking that day two weeks ago, when they'd driven north for three hours after picking up one of his ranch trucks at the airport in Billings, that she didn't really know what she was getting into – not with her new life. Or her new husband. After all what did she really know about Hoyt Chisholm?

And, what did he know about her? They'd both skimmed over their pasts, no doubt telling themselves that the past didn't matter. Or maybe, like her, Hoyt had his reasons for wanting to keep his past to himself.

That was an unsettling thought, she realized as she headed for the front of the rambling ranch house.

Even through the cloud of dust they were kicking up, she recognized the two young men brawling by the corral. Emma sighed, shaking her head as she watched two of her stepsons fighting. When Hoyt had told her that he had six sons, she'd been shocked. Funny how that hadn't come up when they met in Denver and found themselves flying to Vegas for an impromptu wedding.

She'd expected them to be boys since that was what he called them. To her surprise, they were six grown men from ages twenty-eight to thirty-three. But they definitely behaved like boys.

Her six big strapping stepsons were typically involved in some squabble or another on a daily basis and she'd come to realize that Hoyt was usually the reason. The boys, all adopted, had apparently been raised without a woman in the house to give them any guidance and Hoyt dang sure wasn't providing any.

Emma saw her husband standing in the shade at the other end of the porch watching two of his sons 'rassle in the dirt.

"You just going to stand there, Hoyt Chisholm?" she asked as she stepped out on the porch.

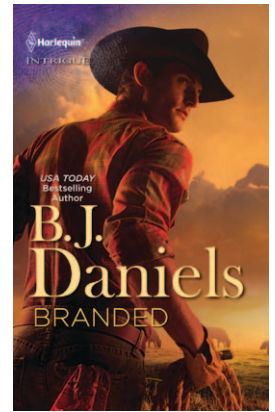
He shot her that grin that had stolen her heart and clearly her senses as well. How else could she explain marrying a man she barely knew to come to this ranch so far from civilization?

Hoyt took off his Stetson and scratched the back of his neck. She could tell he wasn't going to do a darn thing about this. Just as she could see that he wanted her to accept the way things were on the Chisholm Cattle Company ranch. By now he must be realizing that wasn't going to happen.

Stepping off the porch, she walked around to the side of the house to the water faucet, snatched up the hose and turned the faucet on full force.

Hoyt, seeing what she was up to, quickly abandoned the porch as if he just remembered he had something to do in the barn.

Emma was tempted to turn the water on him, but she knew it wouldn't do any good. He'd just laugh and hightail it out of range.



His two sons were still rolling around in the dirt as Emma dragged the hose over and sprayed them.

“What the hell?” Colton said as he leapt to his feet.

“Don’t you be using that kind of language around me young man,” Emma snapped and sprayed him again.

Tanner was on his feet same as his brother, both now soaked to the skin, the dust on their clothes turning to mud.

Emma shook her head as she looked at the two of them and their hangdog expressions. Both were handsome to a fault.

“This is all your doing, Hoyt Chisholm,” she called after her husband. “You’re the reason they’re always squabbling, each of them trying to win favor with you.” She’d seen that within the first twenty-four hours of moving into the main house even though the “boys” had their own houses on the huge ranch that was Chisholm Cattle Company.

Of course Hoyt pretended not to hear but she could tell by the way he ducked his head as he stepped into the barn that he’d heard just fine. His sons were growing up wild. And he thought that was a good thing?

She turned her attention back to the two young men standing before her. They had both retrieved their hats and stood looking sheepish and wet and worried what she might do next.

“I best not catch you fighting like tomcats again,” she said scowling at the two of them. “Now get on out of here before I give you another good soaking.”

They tipped their hats and took off in the direction their father had gone. But within a few feet she could hear them arguing again.

She shook her head. It was time for Hoyt’s “boys” to grow up and she knew exactly what each of them needed. A woman.

Not just any woman. It took a special woman to domesticate a Chisholm man, she thought thinking of Hoyt.

As she turned off the water and coiled up the hose again, she told herself the hardest part would be finding the right woman for each of them. Since marrying Hoyt, she’d been thinking about how to bring this family together. It was clear that her stepsons had been more than surprised when their father brought home a wife – and less than pleased. But she was determined to change all that.

She’d have to be careful though, Emma thought as she turned back to the kitchen and the apple pies she was helping the cook make for supper. If Hoyt or her stepsons got wind of what she was up to, there would be hell to pay.

But she was willing to take that chance. She smiled, thinking of her husband. The key was gentling a man, not breaking him. Love could accomplish the most amazing ends, she told herself, hoping that was true.

She set her mind to which of her stepsons would be first to have his life changed forever with her help – and possibly a cattle prod.

Colton Chisholm wiped blood from his split lip as he limped to his pickup. He told himself he’d gotten the best of the fight, but as he slid behind the wheel, he felt the pain in his ribs and wasn’t so sure about that.

As he started the engine and roared down the road away from the ranch, he thought about just striking out and leaving Whitehorse and the Chisholm Cattle Company behind. He had plenty of reason most days.

But when he glanced in his rearview mirror, he knew he could no more leave this land than he could quit fighting his



brothers for it. He was as much a Chisholm as the rest of them and by damned he wouldn't be pushed out.

Not that his father didn't have him thinking twice about it though. Everyone in six counties was talking about how Hoyt Chisholm had gone to Denver to the cattleman's convention and brought home a wife. And not just any wife. Emma McDougal Chisholm – a buxom redhead with green eyes and a temper.

"The damned fool," Colton said to himself. What made it worse was that his father was plainly head-over-heels in love with the woman. And Emma...well she seemed set on changing things on the ranch. He shook his head. Emma McDougal Chisholm had no idea what she'd signed on for. If she did, she'd be hightailing it out of town before sundown.

As Colton neared the highway on the long dirt road out of the ranch, he saw postman Albert Raines pull up to the huge mailbox marked Chisholm. Albert waved to him and Colton slowed, pulling along side as the postman got out and walked toward his pickup.

"Got a bunch of mail as usual," the tall, skinny Albert said. "I was told to see that you got this personally though." He handed Colton an envelope from the postal service.

At first he thought the postman was joking with him. "This about some new stamp designs?"

"Nope," Albert said with all seriousness. "It's a letter addressed to you that got lost. I brought it special."

Thanks." He tossed it on the seat. He'd gotten other mail that had been caught in some machine and mangled and had ended up in an envelope just like the one Albert had handed him. No doubt it was a bill of some sort since Colton rarely received anything else.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Albert sounded disappointed. "I heard it's been lost for fourteen years."

Colton chuckled. "I'm sure it will keep if it's been lost that long." He waved goodbye as he left and headed down the road to his house. He'd taken over one of the houses when his father had purchased a neighboring ranch a few years back. The house needed work, but Colton had needed space.

While the Chisholm ranch house was huge and rambling, it wasn't big enough for him and his brothers. All of them had moved out when they'd heard about their father's marriage, but they all still returned to the main ranch house for meals. Emma had seen to that.

After cleaning up, Colton headed into Whitehorse, anxious to get his errands done and get back for dinner. Emma had announced that she and cook were baking apple pies and the way his brothers put away food... Emma demanded, that they all sit down to dinner each evening at the huge log dining room table at the ranch.

Crossing Emma had proved to be a bad thing, he thought, smiling at the memory of her turning the hose on him and Tanner. Emma wasn't very tall, but she was feisty as a badger – and just as dangerous when she was riled up. He figured that was one reason his father had fallen for her – and the reason this marriage didn't stand a chance in hell.

It wasn't until later, after picking up supplies, stopping to see if his saddle was fixed yet and having a cup of coffee while he waited at the local café, that Colton climbed back in his pickup and saw the envelope.

He thought about just tossing it. What was the point in looking at a bill that had gotten lost in the mail years ago? Hell, fourteen years ago, he'd been eighteen, too young to have bills and who would have sent him a letter?

Curious now, he tore open the envelope and dumped out the contents.

A once-white small envelope tumbled out on his pickup seat. The moment he saw her handwriting his heart stuttered in his chest and he found himself heaving for breath, the effort almost doubling over from the pain of his banged-up ribs.



He stared at the handwriting, the return address and finally the postmark. The letter had been mailed fourteen years ago in May – right before Jessica left Whitehorse without even saying goodbye and he'd never seen her again.

He felt the heartbreak as if it had been only yesterday as he carefully eased open the back flap and took out the handwritten letter inside.

Colton,

I'm sorry we fought. But I can't stay here at the house any longer. It's only getting worse. I'm running away. I hope you'll come with me. I'll be waiting for you at our special place Friday night at midnight. If you love me, you'll meet me there and we'll go together. I have a surprise for you and can't wait to tell you.

*Love,
Jessica*

Colton felt as if his heart had been ripped out of his chest all over again. He let out a howl of pain as he reread the words. Jessica hadn't just taken off without a word. She'd sent this letter. Only he hadn't gotten it.

They'd had a fight the day before she left school, left Whitehorse, left him. He had been beside himself. He'd even braved going over to her house knowing the reaction he'd get from her father.

Sid Granger had answered the door, his wife Millie behind him. "What the hell are you doing here? Haven't you done enough, you son-of-a—." His wife had grabbed his arm, trying to hold him back, but she was no match for her husband.

Sid had grabbed a baseball bat and chased him out to his pickup. "Jessica's gone and if I ever see your face around here again I'll kill you."

In the days after, Colton had called the house, begging with Sid to tell him where Jessica had gone. But the phone calls had ended with angry words and the slamming down of the receiver. They blamed him for Jessica leaving? He couldn't understand why that was. She'd loved him. It was whatever was going on at home that had made her run away.

A few weeks later, he'd seen Mrs. Granger coming out of the Whitehorse post office.

"Please. Tell me where she's gone," Colton had pleaded.

"Go away." Millie Granger had glanced around as if she was afraid Sid would find out she'd talked to him. "Jessica's gone. She isn't coming back. And even if she was, she wouldn't want anything to do with you."

Colton hadn't believed it at first. He'd been inconsolable for weeks.

"She obviously wasn't the right woman for you," his father finally said after watching him mope around. "Trust me, her leaving is the best thing that could have happened. You both were too damned young to be so serious."

As weeks had turned into months, Colton had been forced to accept that the first woman he'd ever loved no longer wanted anything to do with him.

Now he stared at the letter and understood what had happened, why she'd never tried to contact him. She'd reached out to him, gone to their secret spot that night only to have him not show.

How long had she waited for him thinking he would come for her? The thought of her alone there that night waiting for him, broke his heart all over again. He couldn't bear that she'd gone away believing he hadn't loved her, that wouldn't have been there for her. He had promised to take care of her, look out for her, and when she'd needed him, he hadn't been there.



I never got the letter!

He hadn't been to their special place for fourteen years – not since their fight and her disappearance from his life. As he drove out of town toward the ranch, he remembered the times they'd met there in secret. He would spread a blanket out for them beneath a stand of huge old cottonwood trees alongside of the creek.

Even after all these years, he could remember the sound of the breeze in the leaves overhead, the sweet scent of the wild grasses, the cool coming up off the creek, the heat of her body against his.

It was in the shade of those trees that he'd first told her he loved her. They'd both been seventeen the first time they'd made love under that tree. It had been the first for both of them. Jessica had cried afterward and told him he would always be the only one for her. He'd told her he'd never let anyone hurt her again.

Colton drove past the Granger place, glancing in the direction of the house as he had done for the last fourteen years. The house was set back off the road, almost hidden in a stand of trees. He never passed it that he didn't think of Jessica.

As he passed the barbed wire fence that marked the end of the Granger property and the beginning of Chisholm land, he slowed. Seeing no other vehicles coming down the road from either direction, he pulled in, stopping short of the barbed wire gate.

The gate into this part of the Chisholm ranch property was seldom if ever used. The barbed wire had cut deep into the wooden posts, a sure sign that no one had been back in here in years. Once opened, he drove through the gate, then got out and closed it behind him.

The way in could hardly be called a road. It was a dirt path through some rugged terrain. Grass grew up between the two ruts, scraping the underside of his pickup as he drove back in until he reached the creek and the path petered out.

Parking in a gully where his pickup couldn't be seen from either the road or the Granger property, he walked the rest of the way, following the creek – just as he had done as teenager on his way to meet Jessica.

That night Jessica would have sneaked out of her parents' house and taken the back way, along the creek and through the barbed wire fence onto Chisholm property, following the creek to the secret meeting place.

It had been Jessica who'd found the spot one night after a fight with her father. She'd wandered down the creek bank for half a mile to an oxbow surrounded by tall trees. She'd crawled through the barbed wire fence onto Chisholm land – and realized she'd found the perfect place for them to meet in secret, her father being none the wiser.

Colton slowed his steps as he saw the tops of the trees in the distance and remembered the anticipation he'd felt each time he was to meet her all those years ago.

When he saw their secret spot, he stopped short. Jessica Granger had been his first real girlfriend although they'd been forced to keep it secret because of her father. Sid Granger didn't want his daughter having anything to do with those wild Chisholm boys and no matter what Colton did, he couldn't convince him otherwise.

The spot didn't look as if anyone had been here in the past fourteen years since the land was posted and no one else had reason to come here. As he walked to the trees, stopping in the cool shade, he realized that the last person to stand here had probably been Jessica. His heart lodged in his throat at the thought.

For a moment he swore he caught a whiff of her perfume. The scent took him back. He could close his eyes and feel her in his arms as they lay entwined in the shade of these cottonwoods after making love.

I have a surprise for you and can't wait to tell you. Whatever it had been, he would never know, he thought as he looked around.



What the hell are you doing here? He pulled off his Stetson and raked his fingers through his sandy blond hair. Did he think he was going to find Jessica waiting for him here? He laughed at the absurdity of it.

Hell, he couldn't even be sure she ever came here that night. Maybe she'd changed her mind, sorry she'd written him the letter, and had taken off on her own.

With a start, he remembered Sid Granger had called the ranch that night.

"It's Granger," his father had said after answering the phone in the middle of dinner all those years ago. "He wants to know if you've seen his daughter." Colton had given his father a miserable shake of his head. "He hasn't seen her. They broke up."

He'd never seen Jessica again.

If only he'd gotten the letter, he thought angrily. He would have run off and married her in a heartbeat. She'd been his first love.

Colton took one last look at the spot under the trees. "I'm so sorry, Jessica," he whispered on the warm spring breeze rustling the leaves on the branches over his head.

A part of him ached for what could have been. They would have run away together. He could have gotten a job on a ranch. She could have gotten a job maybe cooking for the hired hands. Or maybe he would have made enough that she didn't have to work, especially if they'd gotten a place to live along with his job.

He sighed, realizing they had both been kids back then. The chances of him getting hired on some ranch would have been slim. Not only that, Jessica didn't know how to cook and she would have gone crazy living on a ranch. She'd always yearned to kick the dust of Montana off her heels and live in some big city. She had this idea that she would be a model. Or even a movie star.

"I'm going to be famous someday," she used to say. "You'll look back and say, 'I knew her when she was a girl.'" It used to make him sad when she talked that way because he knew he would never leave Montana.

What would he have done if he'd gotten the letter?

He would have figured something out, he told himself. He'd have had to. With her family being the way they were, she was all he had. She depended on him.

As he started to turn away, his boot toe caught on something. At first he thought it was a small root from the new growth at the base of one of the cottonwoods.

But as he reached down to free his boot, he saw that it wasn't a root but a leather strap protruding from the dirt. It was attached to something buried under one of the exposed roots.

He pulled on the strap and a small leather shoulder bag came up out of the dirt. The leather was discolored, the design faded over the years, but he recognized it at once.

His heart pounded against his injured ribs. Jessica's purse.