

RUSTLED

Whitehorse Montana, Chisholm Cattle Company, Book 3 of 6

CHAPTER 1

Dawson Chisholm reined in his horse to look back at the ranch buildings in the distance. This was his favorite view of the Chisholm Cattle Company. He'd always felt a sense of pride and respect for the ranching empire his father had built.

Today though he felt the weight of responsibility for the ranch on his shoulders and feared for his father – and the future. Someone wanted to destroy not only what Hoyt Chisholm had built – but Hoyt himself.

“I’m going to ride up into the high country and check the cattle on summer range,” he’d told his five brothers. They knew him well enough to realize as the oldest brother he needed some time alone after everything that had happened.

They’d been at the main house sitting around the kitchen table this morning, avoiding the dining room since their father had been arrested for murder and their stepmother Emma had taken off to parts unknown.

The house had felt too empty so they had all moved back in even though they had their own houses on the huge ranch. When their father’s new bride Emma had come to the house two months ago, she’d required them all to show up freshly showered and changed for supper every evening.

No one questioned Emma’s new rules that included no swearing in the house and bowing their head in prayer before supper. In the weeks since she and their father Hoyt had wed, she’d made a lot of changes at Chisholm Cattle Company.

That was until the body of Hoyt’s third wife turned up and he’d been arrested.

Dawson still couldn’t believe it. There was no way his father was a murderer. Unfortunately given the evidence against him and his wealth, the judge had denied bail and Hoyt was now sitting in jail in Whitehorse awaiting trial.

Emma...well, she’d packed up and skipped town with only a short note saying she couldn’t do this. It had broken their father’s heart. Hoyt Chisholm had looked older than his fifty-six years when Dawson had visited him yesterday evening. He’d taken the news about Emma even worse than Dawson had thought he would.

“Emma wouldn’t just leave,” his father had argued. Emma had been nothing like his father’s other wives. Redheaded with a fiery temper, plump and annoyingly cheerful, her stepsons hadn’t wanted to like her. But she’d won them all over and their father clearly adored her.

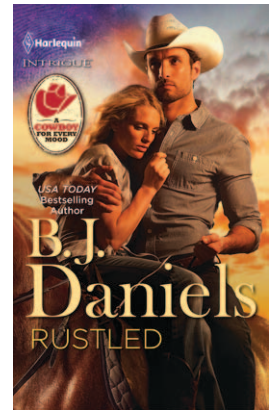
“She left a note, said she couldn’t do this and packed up all her stuff and was gone when we got home,” Dawson said, unable to hide his own anger – and not just at Emma. His father had gone off to a cattleman’s meeting in Denver two months ago and, after a quick stop in Vegas, had come back with a wife. Why was his father surprised the woman would leave under the circumstances?

“Listen to me,” Hoyt said leaning forward behind the thick piece of bullet-proof glass as he spoke into the phone provided for inmates to talk to visitors. “Emma wouldn’t leave. You have to find her.”

Dawson didn’t need this. He and his brothers were having a hard enough time running the ranch without their father. He had a lot more important things to do than find his father’s fourth wife.

But, he had to admit grudgingly, he’d liked Emma and maybe that was why he was so angry with her for bailing on their father.

“Where would you suggest I look? Is there family I can call? Friends? Is she even from Denver?” When his father didn’t



answer any of the questions, he said, “You really don’t know anything about her, do you?”

“I know she wouldn’t leave me,” Hoyt snapped.

Dawson sighed now, took one last look at the ranch and spurred his horse into the thick cool darkness of the pines. The ride up from the main house had taken most of the day. The big blue sky overhead was tinted pink to the west where the sun had dipped behind the Bear Paw mountains.

He breathed in the sweet scent of pine. Since he was a boy, he’d always come to the high country when life got to be too much down on the prairie. Having five brothers, all of them adopted by Hoyt years ago, not even a ranch as large as this one felt big enough sometimes.

“I need one of you to see if you can find Emma,” he’d told his brothers before he’d ridden out.

“Dad just doesn’t want to believe that she deserted him,” Marshall had said. “What’s the point in finding her? She won’t come back.”

“I’ll go,” Zane had said speaking up. When they all looked at him as if he was crazy, he said, “Dad loves her. He has enough problems without worrying about Emma. I’ll see if I can find her. Did he give you any place to start?”

“All we know is that he met her in Denver,” Dawson had said. “I suppose you could start there.”

None of them had any hope that Zane would find her. Even less hope that if he did, that she would come back and stand by their father’s side during his trial.

Dawson couldn’t really blame Emma when he thought about it. Rumors had circled around Chisholm Cattle Company for years after Hoyt’s first wife Laura had drowned on a Fork Peck Reservoir boating trip.

The rumors only got worse after his second wife, Tasha had been killed on a run-away horse. When his third wife Krystal had disappeared, never to be seen again, people who knew him were convinced Hoyt Chisholm had the worst luck with wives. Others weren’t so sure.

There was at least one person – an insurance investigator – who suspected that Hoyt Chisholm had not only murdered all three wives – but would do the same with his latest, Emma.

Dawson knew better. Hoyt was his father, the man who had adopted six motherless boys – Colton, Logan and Zane when the triplet’s mother had died in childbirth, father unknown. He’d adopted Dawson, Tanner and Marshall when their mother had abandoned them, father also unknown.

Hoyt probably would have adopted even more children who needed homes if it hadn’t been for the trouble with his wives.

Dawson being the oldest was three when his father married his second wife, Tasha. They had been married only a short time before her death. He was five when Krystal came into their lives. She’d stayed an even shorter time. He doubted his brothers, who were all a few years younger, remembered any of them.

After that their father had raised them alone until all six of them now ranged from twenty-six to thirty-three. And then Hoyt Chisholm had met Emma.

A new wife had spurred all that old talk about Hoyt’s other wives and brought former insurance investigator Aggie Wells back into their lives – until she’d gone missing. That was when their father’s third wife’s body had turned up. Aggie was still missing.

Dawson felt the temperature begin to drop up here in the mountains. He loved this ride from the sagebrush and prairie to the rocky mountain range, the towering pines and rush of snow-fed creeks. He’d been raised on a horse and felt as at



home there as he did in the high country.

At heart, he was a cattleman, he thought as he heard the comforting sound of cows lowing just over the ridge. There was nothing like that sound or seeing the herd scattered across a wide meadow.

He stopped short way into the meadow and leaned on his saddlehorn to admire the black cattle against the summer green meadow. Chisholm Cattle Company raised the finest Black Angus beef there was – and lots of them.

At that moment he realized what a loner he was. Before Emma had left, he'd noticed that she'd seemed intent on seeing her stepsons settle down with the perfect woman. He shook his head at the thought. Was there a woman alive who could understand his need to ride up here and camp out for a few days with only cows as company?

He laughed at the thought, remembering some of the women he'd dated. Even hard-cored country girls weren't all that up for roughin' it. He thought of the one woman he'd known who might have and quickly pushed the painful thought away.

A cold breeze stirred the deep shadows that had settled into the pine boughs. He glanced across the meadow to the spot where he usually camped and saw something move in the trees.

A hawk burst from a high branch. The cattle began to moo loudly and move restlessly in the bowl-like meadow. Something was spooking them. A mountain lion? A grizzly?

Dawson stared into the trees across the meadow and started to pull his rifle from the scabbard on his saddle, thinking it had to be a large predator for the cattle to get this nervous.

The first rider came out of the trees at a gallop. Dawson pulled his rifle as the rustler came into view and fired a shot into the air as warning before taking aim to fire another. The cattle began to scatter.

A second rustler appeared, then another and another broke from the pines, shots ringing out across the grazing land as the rustlers tried to circle the now stampeding cattle.

Dawson realized the cattle were now headed right for him – and so was one of the riders.