

STAMPEDED

Whitehorse Montana, Chisholm Cattle Company, Book 4 of 6

CHAPTER 1

“Alexa? Alexa, wake up.”

The five-year-old came awake with a start to find her mother beside her bed. Her heart thumped in her tiny chest.

“What is it, Mommy?” she asked, her voice breaking. Just the sight of her mother beside her bed in the middle of the night filled her with panic. She struggled to come out of her sleep. Had she been screaming in her sleep with another nightmare?

Sometimes when she had nightmares, she would wake to find her mother beside her bed, standing motionless, staring down at her. Like now, her mother would have that strange eerie look in her eyes, the one she got when she was working with her clients.

“Honey, I need you to sit up and do something for me.”

Alexa loved her beautiful mother with her long wild curly black hair, her wide violet eyes so like her own and the face of an angel. But she couldn't help the shiver that ran through her. Sometimes her mother scared her.

She rubbed sleep from her eyes and pushed herself up, blinking at the shaft of golden light that spilled across the floor from the hallway. Her mother always left the hall light on and the door cracked open a few inches because of Alexa's nightmares. The light from the hallway illuminated the empty, dark walls of her cave-like room.

“What were you thinking, Tallulah?” Alexa's father had demanded. “She's a child, a little girl, she should have a room painted pink with stuffed animals on the bed and clouds painted on the ceiling – not horrible black walls.”

“The black walls will keep away the nightmares,” her mother had argued.

But they hadn't. And her father had finally given up arguing and left before Alexa's baby brother had come along, and he'd never come back.

“It wasn't his spiritual path to be with us,” her mother had told her when Alexa cried for her daddy. She missed the way he would hold her when she was frightened, the way he would smooth her long wild dark hair with his big hand and the way he would rock her with soothing words until she fell back to sleep.

He used to call what Tallulah did for a living total nonsense. “Don't let it scare you, Alexa. It's all just mumbo-jumbo, stuff your mother makes up for the fools who are silly enough to pay her.”

“Alexa?” There was impatience in her mother's tone now.

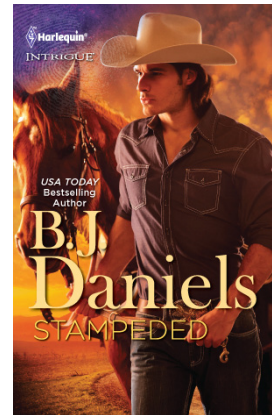
She loved her mother and would do anything for her. The last thing she wanted was to disappoint her.

But she had seen how happy it made her mother when everyone commented on how much Alexa looked like her. Tallulah Cross wanted her daughter to be just like her in every way and that was what frightened her more than the nightmares.

“Honey, I need you to look down at the end of your bed. What do you see?”

Her tiny stomach turned. She sensed how important this was to her mother. But Alexa didn't want to look. She wanted to close her eyes tight and make her mother and whatever might be at the end of the bed go away.

But she always did what her mommy asked her. She was her mommy's good girl, her precious girl.



Alexa sat all the way up and took a breath, wrinkling her nose. The air smelled funny and she felt like she did when she rubbed a balloon on her hair, her skin tingly, the space around her filled with static. Her body began to tremble under the covers as she slowly turned to look toward the end of her bed.

Tallulah Cross made her living in a small room at the front of their house. She told fortunes to the tourists who came through town by looking into the future and talking to those who'd gone to the other side. Dead people.

Alexa had overheard her mother telling her friends that her greatest hope in life was that along with her beauty, she had passed her "gift" on to her daughter. For a long time, Alexa hadn't known what gift she was talking about.

Tonight, she knew. Just as she understood that this was a test and that if she wanted to be her mommy's "precious little girl," she must not disappoint her.

"What do you see, Sweetie?" her mother asked, hope and something close to desperation in her voice.

Alexa tried not to flinch as she looked at the man standing at the end of her bed. He was tall. He stood funny as if one leg was shorter than the other. But it was his face she would never forget, awake or asleep. Half of it was gone.

"You see the man, don't you, Sweetie?"

A sob caught in her throat. "No, Mommy." It was the first lie she'd ever told and she instinctively knew it would come at a very high cost. But she didn't want to be just like her mother even though it would mean she was no longer her mommy's special girl.

Alexa couldn't bear to see her mother's disappointment. Her heart ached as she closed her eyes, lay back down and pretended to go to sleep. It wasn't until she heard her mother leave the room, that she opened them again and looked toward the end of her bed, knowing the man was still there. Nor had he been fooled.

He stared at her with that one dark eye, then he gave her a conspiratorial wink and vanished.

Alexa shut her eyes tight, fighting tears. She didn't want to see dead people. She didn't want them to talk to her. She told herself she wouldn't see them again. Nor would she see the future.

And she didn't for twenty-three years.

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Marshall Chisholm was no carpenter. The cowboy was learning that the hard way, he thought as he put down his hammer for the day and turned to gaze out at the Montana landscape through what would one day be his finished bay window.

While he spent most of his days on the back of a horse herding cattle, he'd fallen in love with this house the moment he'd seen it. Not that there was anything special about it – or even the view. The house was a two-story farmhouse built in the late 1930s. But it had good bones, as they say, and it had spoken to him the moment he'd walked in. Not that he would ever admit that.

There was something about the place that appealed to him even though it had been vacant for many years. He'd known it would take a lot of work, but he'd been eager to get started on it.

Along with the house, Marshall liked the view of the rolling prairie. It stretched out across this vast part of Montana as if endless. Out here, he felt on top of the world. Through every window he could see to the horizon with nothing to break that view on three sides but sagebrush and black angus cattle – his family's cattle.

Chisholm Cattle Company ran more head of cattle than any other in the state and that took a lot of country. He liked that also as far as he could see this was Chisholm land, most of it running to the horizon.

On the third side, the one this upstairs bedroom window faced, there were rolling grain fields and pasture with only one structure on the horizon.

Marshall squinted now as he noticed something different about the old three-story mansion in the distance. He'd looked at it many times since moving into this house. But this time he saw something odd.

Someone was over there.

That was such a rare occurrence that he picked up the binoculars he kept by the window and, peering through them, brought the huge mansion into focus.

He'd heard there had once been a small settlement around the mansion called Wellington, but all the other buildings had been gone for years. The only structure that remained was the monster of a mansion or Wellington Manor as the locals called it.

The massive old place must have dwarfed the other buildings that had been there years before and would have been ostentatious even in these times let alone a hundred years ago. He'd heard stories for years about the family and the house, though he'd never believed them. People liked to think that old places had ghosts.

The last resident of Wellington Manor had died a year ago, an old spinster niece of the original owner, Jedidiah Wellington. Marshall had heard the place was tied up in an estate.

He frowned as he noticed there was a small red sports car parked under the cottonwood trees that flanked the house. In this part of Montana, the only trees that broke up the prairie were those near springs, creeks or settlements. The mansion had a small spring-fed creek that ended in a pond at the end of the row of trees. Marshall liked to swim in the pond since it was half way between his house and the mansion.

As he scanned the scene, he saw that there was also a dark-colored large SUV parked behind the sports car.

How odd, he thought as he lowered the binoculars. Was it possible someone had bought the place? Or could it be squatters? His father had told him that drug dealers coming out of Canada would often stay in abandoned farmhouses, but he'd never seen anyone around Wellington Manor in the last year since it had been empty. The Canadian border was only about thirty miles away, the closest town to the south, Whitehorse, which was another twenty miles, so the dirt road up to this part of the county didn't get a lot of traffic – let alone tourists. He supposed it could be drug runners.

Marshall took another look through the binoculars and saw yet another vehicle coming up the long tree-lined drive to the mansion, this one a small white SUV.

He didn't know anyone who'd even been inside the mansion. Apparently Jedidiah Wellington and his family kept to themselves and so had the old-maid niece who'd been the last one to live there.

His curiosity peaked and tired of carpentry work for the day, Marshall decided to saddle up and ride over to see what was going on.

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Alexa pulled up to the monstrous house with growing unease. The house looked like a hotel, looming three stories up with wings off four sides – not what she'd expected at all. When her brother had told her at the wedding that he and his new bride were remodeling her old family house in Montana, she'd pictured something smaller, set in the mountains with lots of rock and wood. Not this ugly monstrosity.



As she stared at the house, she thought of his recent call saying he needed her to come out for a visit. She'd heard something in his voice that had scared her.

"What's wrong? Is it Sierra?"

"No," Landon had said, clearly irritated. "She's fine. We're fine."

Alexa wished now she'd never voiced her misgivings about her brother's hasty marriage. But she couldn't help worrying that he'd made a mistake and was now realizing it.

Both university students, Landon and Sierra had met while working in Yellowstone Park for the summer and fallen in love. Alexa didn't even get a chance to meet Sierra before the wedding held at Mammoth Hot Springs in the old hotel there until the day before the ceremony.

Sierra Wellington wasn't the woman Alexa would have chosen for her brother, but she'd seen at once what had attracted Landon to the petite pretty blond. Landon, like Alexa, had taken after their mother. He had the curly dark hair, the dark eyes and olive skin of what was rumored to come from fortune-telling gypsy ancestors.

The contrast between Landon and Sierra, Alexa was sure, had been part of the attraction on both of their parts. That and a common denominator called Montana. Both had a tie to the state. Landon's father had allegedly been born there, at least that was what their mother had told them. Neither Alexa or Landon had ever met the man. Nor had their mother apparently bothered to get the man's last name at the time of Landon's conception.

Sierra's roots ran deeper in Montana with several generations of Montanans and a family house that still stood in what had been a town named after her great great grandfather.

"It's this house," her brother had said on the phone. "There's something wrong with it." When Landon had told her about this great idea he and Sierra had to turn the mansion she'd inherited into a bed and breakfast, Alexa hadn't shared their enthusiasm.

"You mean structurally?" she'd asked, relieved it was nothing more earth-shattering than a construction problem. Neither her brother or his wife knew anything about running a bed and breakfast and Alexa questioned the feasibility when the closest town was Whitehorse, apparently a small, western town with a declining population. Not to mention that this wide-open prairie part of Montana wasn't the one most tourists came to see.

She'd kept her reservations about their plan to herself though, fearing alienating her brother who seemed as excited about the prospect as his wife.

"I know this is asking a lot, but I need you to come out here," Landon had said. "I want you to see the house and tell me what you think. What do you say, Sis?"

What could she say? He was her only family since their mother had died a year ago. She would do anything for him and he knew it. Also she felt honored that he wanted her opinion.

"I'll drive out this weekend." It was a ten-hour drive from Spokane, Washington where she lived and worked as a reporter. She could get a few days off from the newspaper without any trouble and she hadn't seen her brother since the wedding and was worried about him.

"It might take more than a weekend," Landon had said, adding, "It's a big house."

The mansion was indeed big, she thought now as she looked up at it. Big and ugly as if built by someone who wanted not to just impress but shock. There was nothing engaging about the structure. All she could hope was that it was more hospitable inside, since she didn't like old houses. As she stared at it, she feared coming here might have been a terrible mistake.

Alexa climbed out of her white SUV as the front door opened and her brother Landon came out to her. He looked so happy to see her that she shoved aside her misgivings.

"It is wonderful to see you," he said as he hugged her tightly. "Thank you so much for coming."

She drew back to study him, thinking how much she loved him. Sometimes she forgot how handsome and sweet he was. Their mother had called him her little prince. Both of them had adored Landon but somehow he hadn't grown up spoiled.

If anything, he was too generous with his money and his love, Alexa thought as Sierra appeared in the wide doorway.

"Welcome to Wellington Manor," Sierra said with a grand gesture. "That's what the locals call it and I think it fits the place. You're early. Supper's not quite ready. The others are either napping or in town for supplies but should be back any minute."

"The others?" Alexa asked her brother.

"We have friends helping get the house ready for guests," Landon said as he reached into the back of her vehicle for her suitcase. "Only one suitcase?" He looked disappointed.

"I travel light," she said with a smile and reluctantly let him lead her toward the mansion. She could feel tension between her brother and his new wife and suspected it hadn't been Sierra's idea to invite her to come for a stay.

She wondered whose idea it had been to have these friends help get the house ready for guests, after all Sierra and Landon had given up their honeymoon to come here and get started on the bed and breakfast.

As they walked toward the front entry, Alexa noticed something that hadn't registered minutes before. Her brother was rubbing his left arm.

"Did you hurt yourself?" she asked and saw him glance toward his wife before he answered.

"Just me being clumsy." He put his other arm around Alexa and smiled at his wife in the doorway. Sierra smiled back and disappeared into the house, leaving Alexa with the distinct impression that her brother was hiding something for Sierra's sake.

The moment she stepped into the house, she felt the cold. It instantly crept into her bones and made her shiver.

"It's a bit drafty," Sierra said, no doubt having witnessed Alexa's reaction.

She could see that both Sierra and Landon were defensive about the house. She fought not to show the effect it was having on her. The mansion had once been opulent from the marble foyer to the huge sunken living room with its massive stone fireplace and ornate stairway that swept upward. Hallways ran from the living area like spider legs, disappearing in the dim light.

"Isn't it beautiful," Sierra gushed. "I just love it. Can't you just see it as a bed and breakfast? Wait until you see the rest of it."

Alexa smiled at her sister-in-law's enthusiasm. The house had recently been cleaned but there was still a musty smell as if the rooms had been closed up—even when someone had been living here. Only a little light bled through the high leaded stain glass windows. Heavy velvet curtains hung next to the lower windows and while the glass had been recently cleaned, even the summer sun seemed to be having a hard time getting through the glass.

"I'm sure you're tired after your long drive," her brother said, apparently wanting to talk to her alone. "Why don't I show you to your room."

"Oh, you'll want a tour first," Sierra said, sounding both surprised and annoyed at her husband's suggestion.

"I would love one later," Alexa said quickly. "Landon's right, I would like to freshen up first."

Sierra looked disappointed. "I've just been so excited to show you the house. My great great grandfather designed it, you know." She gave a little pout, but said, "I guess I'll see how supper is coming instead. I think I hear the others pulling in now."

"I'd love to see it after supper, thank you," Alexa said, relieved her sister-in-law hadn't insisted. She sensed Landon's need to talk



to her and whatever this was about, he hadn't wanted Sierra to hear.

He was quiet as he led her upstairs then through what seemed like a maze of hallways before stopping at an end room. Opening the door, he stepped back to let her enter.

"Sierra got the room ready for you," he said, pride in his voice.

Alexa was reminded how much her brother loved his wife and how careful she had to be around Sierra so she didn't hurt his feelings. She knew she wasn't being fair. She barely knew the woman and chastised herself for not giving Sierra more of a chance.

"It's beautiful," she said as she entered the room. And it was.

The wood floors were buffed to a golden shine, the huge canopy bed was adorned in white linens. An array of pillows were piled against the carved wooden headboard. An antique vanity stood against one wall with two matching highboys and a love-seat and over-stuffed chair on the other.

"The house came filled with furniture," Landon said. "There is even more up on the third floor. The last resident used that floor mostly for storage. The place really is huge, isn't it?"

He sounded nervous and while she was anxious to know why he'd gotten her here, she warned herself not to push.

"Sierra chose this room because of the view and the peace and quiet," Landon said. "It's the furthest from where the construction work is going on. We're remodeling some of the lower rooms that were built for servant quarters."

"The view is wonderful," Alexa said as she stepped through the open French doors onto a small balcony. The land seemed vast and endless -- just like the clear blue sky overhead. She'd never been to Montana before, but all the stories she'd heard about it seemed to be true. It really was amazing country. She could imagine what it must have been like when thousands of buffalo roamed it.

As she stared out, a cowboy on a horse came into view. Something in her froze. She stood transfixed as he rode from the stand of large cottonwood trees and into the sun and sage. For a moment she'd thought she'd conjured him up from her imagination, he looked so at home in the saddle with this landscape in the background. He wore jeans, boots, a red-checked western shirt and what she thought must be a Stetson resting on his longish raven black hair. A brown and white looking mutt of a dog ran along a few yards off to the side of his horse.

Alexa held her breath, wanting him to turn and look in her direction. She desperately needed to see his face.

Just when it appeared he would ride by without looking in her direction, he glanced up at her.