



# CROSSFIRE

MONTANA  
RESCUE  
NOVELLA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING  
RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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## CHAPTER ONE

~Excerpt~

The smell of his mother's flapjacks only meant trouble.

Because somehow, Jackie Logan had managed to sneak out of her room, down the stairs, and into her farmhouse kitchen without her cast thumping once on the floor to wake him.

Which mean that Kade's panicked sixteen-hour trek across Montana yesterday, driven by Duke's morning phone call, had been completely unnecessary.

Kade opened his eyes to the smell, and the room waxed an eerie gray, the inklings of pre-dawn across eastern Montana. He grabbed his phone and lit up his screen.

*Seriously, Mom—4:30?*

The last time Jackie Logan rose this early to make him breakfast, Kade had been working for Dillon Oil, believing he could carve out the life he'd always dreamed of.

He slid out of his bed, old habits causing him to duck before he hit his head on the sloping ceiling, and stared out the window.

The view was marred only by the occasional oil rig, churning deep into the earth. The sun, just cresting over the plains, pressed fire into the horizon, orange and blood red against the steel-gray night.

Kade stretched, his muscles tight from the cramped bed, but that's what he got for going soft, sinking into the lap of luxury accommodations Ian Shaw provided for him back on his ranch—the perks of being the foreman for a billionaire who didn't know anything about ranching. He grabbed his jeans where they lay across his duffel bag, still packed, dropped in the wee hours. Three hours ago, to be exact.

The smell of bacon sliding under his door awakened the beast inside him, growling. He buttoned the jeans and reached for his T-shirt, pulling it on even as he thumped down the stairs. "Mom, what are you doing? You shouldn't be—Duke. What are you doing here?"

He should say *back here*, because last night when he'd driven up, he'd found his mother, covered in a patchwork quilt, resting on her old green sofa, and crusty former sheriff and closest neighbor, Duke Eliason, sitting in the rocking chair next to her, beating her in a game of gin rummy.

Yep, Kade had stayed away too long.

Of course, he hadn't seen old Duke's truck when he pulled up—in its usual spot on the far side of the house. Kade used to wonder if he parked there to hide from the neighbors.

Now, he believed it. Sure, she needed someone to bring her home from the hospital, but...well, Duke had a lot of raw nerve to volunteer.

"Good morning," Duke said, without a trace of guilt—much less shame—on his face. Like he belonged on that high-top stool slid up to Mom's yellow Formica counter helping her...wrap breakfast burritos?

Kade had stepped into a time capsule, keenly aware of the simple life he'd grown up in. The bones of the tiny 1970s farmhouse creaked as the house warmed with the dawn. Mom hadn't updated, well, ever, the yellow kitchen decorated with the chicken-and-rooster wallpaper that he'd memorized while sitting in time-out as a child. She still had the metal Formica table with the yellow top and matching red vinyl chairs. Now, the hand-me-downs from his grandmother could probably be called retro, along with the forest-patterned furniture and old RCA television that probably didn't work anymore.

His mother had the money to upgrade, but she didn't like the trouble.

Their family motto, perhaps.

Although he could admit he liked the familiar smells of his bedroom, the old quilt, the fraying afghan, the pictures of his high school offensive lineman years still on the wall. Pictures of

him and Nash, arms thrown over each other's shoulders, knocking helmets after the state championship. He should have taken those down probably, but he'd left town seven years ago as if he might be on fire. He hadn't dreamed the memories would be waiting for him when he returned.

"What is going on here? And Mom, you should be sitting down."

He came over to the counter to urge her to a stool.

"I'm fine, Kade." She wore her dark hair pulled back with a headband; it curled at the ends like a fifties bob. He recognized one of his father's old plaid snap-up shirts, the arms rolled up, a T-shirt under it where she'd tied the shirt at the waist. And she wore a pair of faded jeans and one worn cowboy boot, her other foot in a thick hospital cast.

"If you want to help, wrap a burrito." She leaned on a pair of crutches as she scooped eggs into a large flour tortilla, added a strip of bacon, a sprinkle of cheese, and slid the concoction over to Duke. He folded it up and rolled it in tin foil, adding the roll into a basket. It was joining what looked like her famous wrapped pancake rounds pre-soaked in syrup.

"You're not fine—you broke your ankle, Mom. You're supposed to be staying off your feet." But he slid onto a stool and grabbed a tortilla and a spoon.

"I told you that you didn't have to drive out here like a scared prairie dog—I'm just fine."

She laughed and leaned over, kissing his cheek. "You're such a worrier."

"No, I just don't want another morning call that says my mother is in the hospital." He looked at Duke, hoping to inject a little *Why are you letting her do this?* into his glare. The old cowboy just shrugged, the lines of trying to argue with Jackie Logan etched into his face, his graying whiskers. Duke Eliason always reminded Kade a little of Sam Houston, wiry, dark eyes, and an even temper. Kade had only seen him lose it once.

In the early days after his dad's death, Kade had let Duke help with things Kade couldn't do yet—fix the car, re-roof the house, repair the kitchen sink clogs. Later, when he'd known better, he'd drawn a line.

Apparently, Duke had trampled it into smithereens in the last seven years.

"What is all this? Are you feeding a football team?" Maybe the Dawson Warriors had early-season practice. His mother had season tickets, probably still ran the annual booster club barbecue. That's what happened when you held the mayor's seat for two decades.

"Nope," his mom said. "Feeding some poor squatters."

Kade met Duke's eyes as he placed a wrapped burrito into a nearby basket, full with over a dozen wrapped packages. "Please tell me this is a joke."

"Her idea," Duke said.

Kade looked at his mom. "You've got to be kidding me."

"It's my land. I can do what I want with it." She pushed herself up from the chair and maneuvered herself toward the door as Duke picked up the basket. "Grab that other basket, will you, Kade?"

Grab the other—Kade shook his head but obeyed because that's what he did around his mother. Duke held open the door and she hobbled out to his truck, now pulled up outside.

The dawn had begun to spill into the day, turning the wheat grass to flame as it swayed in the August breeze. The air hinted of gas and oil, the Larsons' grazing head of Black Angus.

Duke loaded his basket into the truck. Kade added his, and by the time he reached his mother, she'd already hoisted herself into the front seat. Ornery woman. She scooted over, however, and patted the seat next to her. "C'mon."

His mouth tightened. He hadn't come back to Dawson to stir up the past, not when he'd managed, finally, to put his life back together.

Still, he climbed in, and Duke bumped them down the road and over the land Kade's father had died for, past the gullies and draws that washboarded the prairie, and finally along the eastern edge of their land, where it ran along the county line and right up to the Dillon Oil fields.

"It's grown."

"Doubled since you left, Kade," Duke said, muscling the truck over a pothole the size of Texas.

No longer a shanty town of poorly constructed tents and run-down trailers, the encampment of roughnecks had evolved to RVs with slide-outs, tiny homes on trailers, and even a few that looked permanent. Kade noted where some ingenious electrician had bootlegged power from one of the overhead lines.

"Dawson can't keep up with the housing," Jackie said as they pulled up near a company of tents, most of them family sized, although a few two- and three-man A-frames suggested desperate living. "The county outlawed any RVs on public property—or private—without a permit. These men have nowhere else to go."

Men who looked like they hadn't showered in a month—oil in the creasing of their skin, soiling their clothes many any bearded, their hair contained under dirty caps—huddled around Coleman stoves, heating coffee, stirring instant oatmeal into tin cups. Some of them sat on coolers, all of them bearing the weariness in their eyes of twelve-hours-a-day tours.

Kade's bones ached just looking at them—probably most of them working roustabout or other menial jobs. But a job was a job, and probably most of them had come to the North Dakota/eastern Montana oil fields in a desperate, sold-out hope of employment.

He knew the taste of that desperation too well.

Duke stopped the truck, got out, and headed to the back. A few of the men had risen, pride in their eyes causing them to glance away even as their feet shuffled them toward the truck.

A young man, maybe no more than nineteen, came up, offered a wry smile to Kade's mother.

"Hey, Roy," his mother said, handing him a burrito. "When is that beautiful wife of yours headed this way?"

"We're saving for a trailer. Then, maybe in a couple months." He took the burrito. "What happened to your leg?"

"Ornery horse. It brought my son home, though."

Roy glanced at Kade, who met his eyes. "Nice to meet you, sir."

Huh.

Roy turned back to Kade's mother. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Be safe today."

He nodded, and she greeted the next man. Lonny, or something like that—Kade didn't hear the conversation as he took a basket and helped hand out the breakfasts. They all knew his mother, of course.

And she, them, apparently.

"Does she do this every morning?" Kade asked Duke, who was handing out the flapjacks.

"Mmmhmm." Duke clamped one of the roustabouts on the shoulder. "Glad you made it back, Mario. How's the shoulder?"

Mario, dark-haired, brown-eyed, shrugged. "It'll work."

So Duke was his mother's cohort in this nonsense.

They finished handing out breakfast, and Jackie made a few rounds on her crutches while Duke packed up. Kade hovered, wanting to throw out a word or two of encouragement—that it would get better, that the land wouldn't let them down. But he'd heard the black gold might be drying up and didn't want to lie.

His mother finally got in the truck, and they bumped back over the land toward the ranch house, the morning turning the fields to gold.

“Why, Mom?”

She pressed her hand to his arm. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

He couldn’t disagree.

He looked out the window. “Do you ever see...”

Silence. “Yes. He’s back, but he lives in town now, with his little girl. And *wife*.” She glanced at him. “He’s a town hero.”

Kade stared at her, and she raised an eyebrow. “See, a person *can* come home.”

Oh, Mom.

A sheriff’s cruiser waited for them as they pulled up to the house. Duke stiffened. “I told him we were finished with this conversation.” A man in uniform stood on the porch.

Kade sat up. “Is that—”

“It’s Fritz Johnson,” his mother said. “*Sheriff* Johnson.” She tightened her hand on Kade’s arm. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice,” Kade growled. He got out without greeting the sheriff and helped his mom out.

She made a noise, then apparently not heeding her own instructions—“What are you doing here, Fritz?” She hiked her crutches under her arms, moving toward the steps at an alarming speed.

Fritz swiped off his hat. “Now, Jackie, you know I can’t ignore this anymore. The city voted—”

“It’s my land.” She hit the porch, and the man had the presence of mind to back up. “And if I say they can squat there, then—”

Kade stepped up beside her, edged a little between her and the sheriff. “We don’t want trouble.”

“Kade Logan. Never thought I’d see you back here.” Fritz gave him a once over. That’s what seven years did, turned him from a young buck to a wide-shouldered man. He wouldn’t go down so easily anymore.

Kade didn’t respond. Yeah, he hadn’t expected to return either. And he wasn’t staying for long.

“Listen, they’re stealing power from the grid—and not just yours but the Larsons’—and even Haddie Brown filed a complaint.”

Kade stilled. Haddie was *here*, in Dawson?

His mother glanced at him, just a quick skim as if she knew his knees had turned to oil. Kade reached out for the railing.

Duke came up from behind him. “We know the ordinance. What are you going to do, run them off? They’re decent men, looking for a decent living.”

Fritz shook his head. “You’re one to talk, Duke! You know better than anyone the trouble these people bring.”

Duke’s mouth tightened into a dark line. “It’s not these young bucks—it’s the gangs from California and drug cartels and the sex traffickers who are destroying Dawson.”

“And it starts with these squatters.”

Jackie raised her voice. “They have nowhere else to go!”

Kade rarely heard his mother’s voice raised—usually it turned lethally quiet, and he’d learned that’s when to hide.

But now it shook, as if she’d lost hold of its tether. “I’m not turning them away—you’ll just have to arrest me.”

“Oh, perfect, Mom. Get in a fight with the law.”

She rounded on him, maneuvering so well on her crutches that maybe she *didn't* need him. "Some things are worth fighting for, Kade. It's something your father understood, and it's high time you learned that."

If she'd hit him with a sledgehammer it wouldn't have hurt worse.

Fritz held up his hand. "I didn't come out here to start a fight."

"No one ever does," Kade said, not quite meaning for that to slip out.

"I'll give you three days to ask them to leave. Then I'll cut off their power. And if that doesn't work, I'll have to start making arrests." Fritz put his hat back on, glanced at Kade. "Don't let it start with your mother."

He left them on the porch.

Kade watched him go, leaning hard on the railing.

"I never did like him," his mother said.

"It wasn't his fault," Duke said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "It was mine."

"He was there," Kade said softly. Then again, so was he. He looked at his mother. "I really don't want to stir up trouble."

She turned away, toward the oil fields, the shanty town. Toward the old Brown place. Haddie.

Kade sighed and headed into the house.

For a moment, he simply didn't recognize the person slumped on the chair, his head down on the Formica table, blood pooling on the yellow surface. Dressed in work pants, his shirt torn and bloody, his hair matted and dirty, the man looked like he'd been dragged through town and kicked behind a Dumpster. Especially when he raised his head and turned to look at Kade. One eye swollen shut, his lip misshapen, an open cut on his cheek. His arm wrapped around what could be broken ribs.

"Kade," the man said, his voice thick. "Wow, I'm glad to see you."

Not the greeting Kade expected. Not from his former best friend, quarterback and fellow roughneck Nash McRae, the man who had, seven years ago, beaten Kade within an inch of his life and left him for dead.

"You gotta help me."