

RETURN TO HOMECOMING RANCH

by Julia London

Except

Outside, she could hear the voices rise to a crescendo at the opening kick off. She lifted her head, breathed out once more. Dr. Huber was right—deep breathing did help. Libby pitched forward onto her hands and knees, then pushed herself up, down dog style, to standing. She looked at herself in the mirror. There was no sign that she was on the verge of exploding with disappointment and frustration. She sighed, tucked in a stray curl or two, smoothed her top, and with one last deep breath, reached for the bathroom door, unlocking it and pulling it open.

She let out a little squeal of surprise to see Sam standing there, leaning against the wall opposite the door. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes. Why?” she asked defensively.

Sam cocked a brow.

“I’m fine,” she said adamantly.

“Okay,” he said, and pushed away from the wall.

“But wait—I need to know something. Do you think I would do something to torpedo Leo’s fundraising just because Gwen is involved?” she blurted, because it suddenly seemed of the utmost importance that Sam not think that, of all people.

“No,” he said firmly. “Don’t let it get to you, Libby. You know how it is out in the world today—people are more cautious than they used to be.”

“So basically, what you’re saying, is all of Pine River is worried that I will be the one to pick up a gun and start firing.”

He smiled sympathetically. “I wouldn’t say all.”

Libby blinked.

“I’m teasing you.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You should look into stand-up comedy.”

“Maybe I will,” he said, and moved forward. Only inches separated them now. “Are you ready to come watch some football?”

Libby sighed, and before she knew what she was doing, she dropped her forehead to Sam’s shoulder. “I don’t think I can.”

“Sure you can,” he murmured.

They stood awkwardly a moment—Libby leaning into Sam, her face in his shirt, her arms at her side. Sam standing stiff and still. But then Libby felt him lift one hand. He put it on the small of her back.

“Don’t cry,” he said.

She snorted. “I’m not crying. I’m too mad to cry.”

Another hand came up and landed on her back. He gave her a strange, but friendly little pat, as if he didn’t know what to do with her precisely.

Libby lifted her head. In that close hallway, Sam’s eyes looked dark. “Sam—”

“No,” he said quickly, cutting her off. “I meant what I said, Libby. No more hand-holding.”

“I know. I heard you the first five times you said it.” His eyes were the color of turbulent, churning seas.

“Great,” he said as his gaze drifted to her mouth. “Then you understand that your problem is not mine.”

“Good!” she said, studying his bottom lip, full and wet. A shiver of memory raced down her spine. “You’re too bossy, anyway.”

“God, don’t talk anymore,” he said, and lowered his head, his mouth hungrily finding hers.