

THE DOC'S HOLIDAY HOMECOMING

by Virginia McCullough

EXCERPT

TALK ABOUT A first impression gone wrong. Please, give her the previous five minutes back and Olivia would start over and do much, much better. As she watched Jeff walk away, she resolved that from now on she'd watch her tongue when it came to his relationship with Heather. As was only right, she'd leave that to the two of them. At the same time, she might have known Jillian would plunge right into a conversation with Jeff about horses. In her daughter's mind, Heather's legendary horse-loving brother was a kindred spirit. Maybe it was inevitable that Jillian end up a girl devoted to horses and riding, but not when her body was still recovering from the effects of chemotherapy. Even if the assault to her body wasn't obvious to the untrained eye, Olivia had absorbed almost too much information about what chemo could do to a child.

Then there was Jeff himself. Olivia had seen photos and even his mother's paintings of him done over a period of years. No way had those images prepared Olivia for the real guy. They hadn't done him justice, not even close. He had a presence about him that went beyond his thick dark hair and deep-set eyes that brought to mind luscious dark chocolate. With his wide shoulders and muscular arms, he had a body sculpted by the physical work of ranching or more recently, crewing on trawlers and freighters.

Olivia had expected him to be more as Heather described him, still hardened and bitter about losing his family's legacy, this very ranch. If those old feelings were still a part of Jeff, he wasn't showing them at the moment. At least not today, and not with Carson nearby. Whatever. It wasn't her job to analyze any of this. His feelings about this ranch and his former home were completely irrelevant. She had formed an opinion that would guide all her dealings with the man. No matter how friendly, even charming Jeff Stanhope might be, he was a runner. A man who ran away from anything that smacked of responsibility. Like her dad. And Jillian's father. She didn't need a third runner messing up her life.