

HEARTWARMING

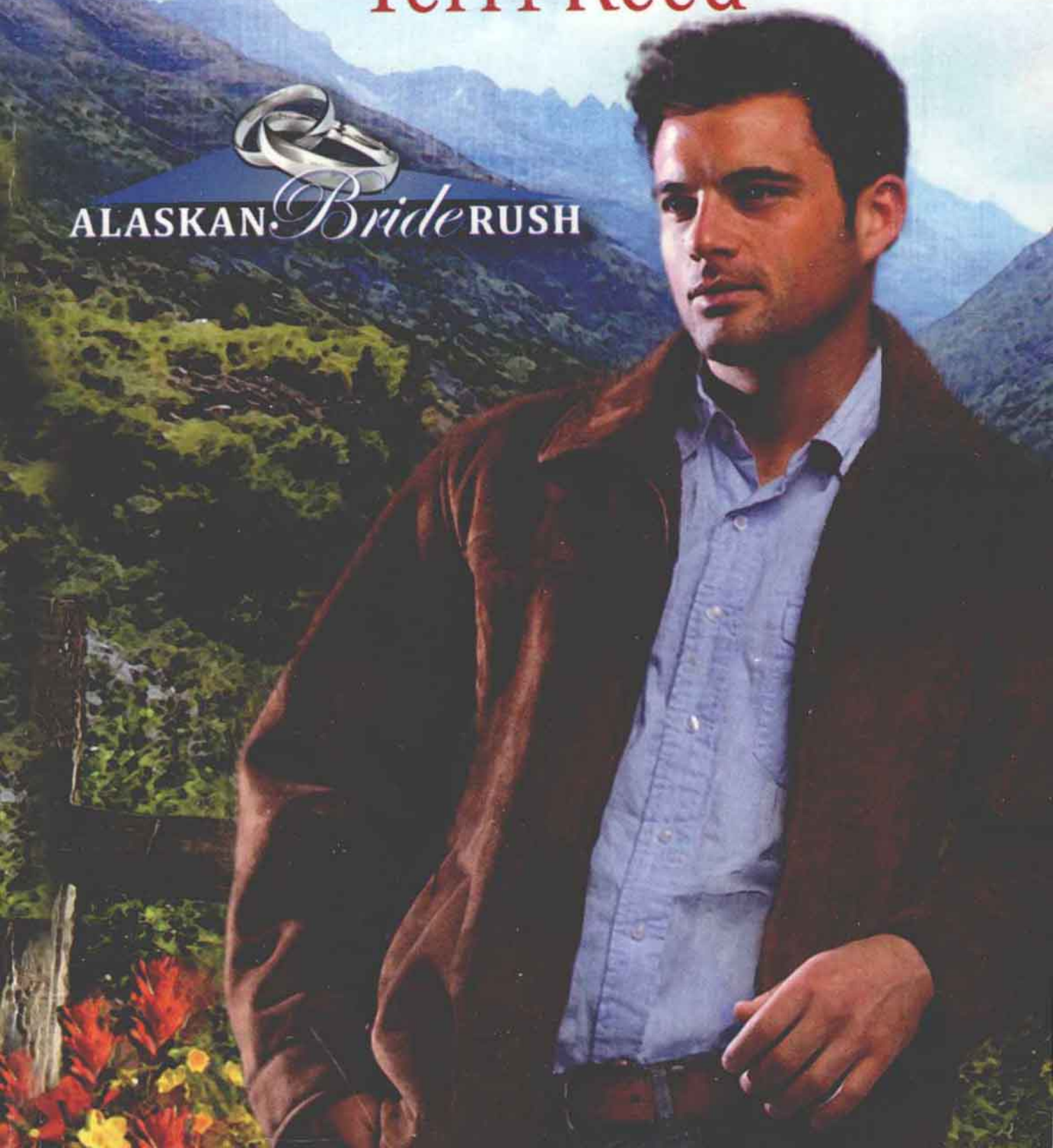
Love Inspired®

Treasure Creek Dad

Terri Reed



ALASKAN *Bride* RUSH



Dear Reader,

Welcome back to Wild Horse, Wyoming. I hope you enjoyed getting comfortable and revisiting the Granger Family Ranch. In the snowy beauty of the breathtaking landscape, you can feel the gentle country breeze on your face, hear the cattle calling and find peace. As you know, a few things have changed since Rori and Justin's book, *The Rancher's Promise*. Frank tried to figure out if he had a chance with lovely Cady. Justin and Rori got married, and a sheriff moved to town. Amid all this, Autumn Granger was trying to get her ranch work done. She never fathomed how true love would come in the form of a big-city vice cop.

I wrote this story from my heart and from my experiences of growing up in the country. I've hidden several childhood memories in these pages—small-town weddings, the church's Christmas bazaar and even an affectionate bottle-raised bull. It's why the Grangers' stories feel like home to me. It's my hope you feel the same way. I also hope you liked how Autumn and Ford's journey brought the true love God meant for them.

Wishing you the best of God's blessings this Christmas season,

Julian Hart

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are Autumn's first impressions of the big-city sheriff? What does this say about her character?
2. What is Ford's reaction when he first sees Autumn? What does this tell you about his character? How do you know he is sincere?
3. In the beginning of the story Autumn wrestles with fear. She is afraid to trust in love again. How does she overcome this? Have you ever felt this way? How has it affected you, and how have you handled it?
4. Why doesn't Frank ask Cady out? What is he afraid of? Why is she shy around him? What is she afraid of?
5. What role does the community of the town play in the story? How does it help develop the romance? What Christian values does it show?
6. Why does Autumn agree to dance with Ford at the wedding? What new part of her character does this reveal?
7. What do you think are the central themes in this book? How do they develop? What meanings do you find in them?
8. How does God guide both Autumn and Ford? How is this evident? What do they learn about their faith?

9. Autumn fears that no man will love her just as she is. How is this challenged through the book? What causes her to change?
10. What role do the animals play in the story?
11. Do you perceive Ford differently as the book progresses? What do you see? How do you know he will be happy staying in Wild Horse?
12. What do you like most about Ford and Autumn as a couple? How do you know they are meant for each other?
13. What is the story's predominant imagery? How does it contribute to the meaning of the story? Of the romance?
14. There are many different kinds of love in this book. What are they? What roles do they play in Autumn and Ford's romance?
15. When does Autumn finally believe true love can happen for her? What does she learn?



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Autumn. The worry in his gut cinched one knot tighter.

The door flew open before he reached the porch and a younger version of Autumn with serious blue eyes and red-brown hair stepped out to greet him. The college-aged girl had a streak of blood on her pajama top.

"Autumn?" he choked out, unable to ask the question.

"You're the sheriff? You made good time from town." The girl spun on her heels, gestured to him and led the way toward the brightly lit back door. "Justin and my sister are out there, and they haven't come back."

His knees felt half-jelly as he forced his feet to carry him up the walk. Usually he was invincible, but the thought of Autumn out there facing armed thieves made him weak. He glanced around. Nothing but miles of rangeland and cattle. The paramedics were volunteers from town who were at least twenty minutes away. And a hospital? He had no idea where the closest trauma center would be.

This was a sign. He cared more about Autumn than he'd realized.

Books by Jillian Hart

Love Inspired

- **A Soldier for Christmas*
- **Precious Blessings*
- **Every Kind of Heaven*
- **Everyday Blessings*
- **A McKaslin Homecoming*
- A Holiday to Remember*
- **Her Wedding Wish*
- **Her Perfect Man*
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- **Blind-Date Bride*
- †*The Soldier's Holiday Vow*
- †*The Rancher's Promise*
- Klondike Hero*
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- **The McKaslin Clan*
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- ***Buttons & Bobbins*

Love Inspired Historical

- **Homespun Bride*
- **High Country Bride*
- In a Mother's Arms*
- "Finally a Family"
- ***Gingham Bride*
- ***Patchwork Bride*

JILLIAN HART

grew up on her family's homestead, where she helped raise cattle, rode horses and scribbled stories in her spare time. After earning her English degree from Whitman College, she worked in travel and advertising before selling her first novel. When Jillian isn't working on her next story, she can be found puttering in her rose garden, curled up with a good book or spending quiet evenings at home with her family.

JILLIAN HART

~ HIS HOLIDAY BRIDE ~



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HIS HOLIDAY BRIDE

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My times are in Your hand.
—*Psalms* 31:15



Chapter One



Autumn Granger knew trouble when she saw it, even if she was on the back of a horse riding the crest of a rocky ridge at the tail end of a hard, cold day. She wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck, ignored the wintry bite of wind and focused her binoculars on the cluster of break-away cattle swarming like flies in the field below.

Hard to tell one cow from another at this distance. Could be Granger stock, but it was impossible to read the brand with the sun slanting low in her eyes. She fished her cell from her pocket and hit speed dial. She was number three man around the ranch. Her older brother Justin would know the scoop.

“Yeah?” he answered, sounding out of breath. He wasn’t having an easy afternoon, either.

“Do you have visual on the north Hereford herd?” She swung her binoculars around—nope, still couldn’t get a good view—and swept the length of the fence line. Maybe downed barbed wire would tell a better story.

“Dad, Scotty and I are feeding them now. Where are you?”

“The ridge north of the ranch house. Cattle are out.” Major bummer.

"I suppose there's a chance they could belong to the Parnells." Justin pondered. "If they turn out to be ours, will you have time to run them in?"

"Already on it." So much for getting off early. That's the way it was when you worked a ranch. The animals came first. She pocketed the phone and dropped the binocs, winding them around her saddle horn. When she drew her Stetson brim down a bit to better shade her face, her bay quarter horse twisted her neck to give an incredulous look.

"I promised you a warm rubdown and a bucket of grain, but we've got to do this." She patted Aggie's nut-brown coat. "Duty calls. Are you with me, girl?"

Aggie nickered a bit reluctantly and started the treacherous descent. Rocks and earth crumbled, speeding ahead of them down the steep slope. Autumn stood in her stirrups, leaning back to balance her weight for Aggie. Winter birds scattered, and in the brush up ahead a coyote skedaddled out of sight. The Grand Tetons marched along the horizon, majestic and purple-blue against the amber crispness of the late November plains. Something in the fields below reflected a blinding streak of light. Strange. She grabbed her binocs and looked again. She focused in until the image came clear. A police vehicle sat sideways in the road as if it had turned a corner, saw the cattle and hit the brakes just in time. Interesting.

That couldn't be the new sheriff, could it? *Lord, please let him know what he's doing. We need a good lawman around here.* The town had brought someone in from out of state, but rumor had it the city slicker hired for the job wouldn't be on until mid-December. Rumors couldn't always be counted on, and maybe this was proof

positive. She gave Aggie more rein as the horse slid the last yard to the buffeting clumps of bunch grass below.

“Good girl,” she praised, patting her mare’s neck. Aggie gave a snort because she knew they would be heading back home the way they came, likely as not. The mare could not be looking forward to climbing up the slope.

Aggie’d had a long day, too. Sympathetic, Autumn lifted her binocs again. This time, she was interested in the cattle. She was close enough to make out the brand.

“Hey, there.” A man in a brand new Stetson, black T, Levis and polished riding boots held up a hand in greeting. He stepped away from his four-wheel drive with “Sheriff” in black on the doors and waded through the fallow grasses. “The cows wouldn’t happen to be yours, would they?”

“No, sir.” She pulled up Aggie, straining to see every last cow flank. “These bear the Parnells’ brand.”

“Parnell? Sorry, I’m new around here.”

“No kidding.” When you lived in a small town, strangers stuck out like a sore thumb. “I’m Autumn Granger.”

“Good to meet you, Miss Granger. I’m Ford Sherman.” He knuckled back his hat to get a better look at her, revealing just about the most handsome face she’d ever set eyes on. Big blue eyes were striking against his suntanned complexion. His nose was straight and strong but not too big for his face, a complement to the slashing cheekbones and a jaw that would make most male models cry. A day’s growth clung to his jawline, a rough texture on a man who was rumored to be city bred.

He was definitely out of place on a Wyoming section road. She wondered how long he would last in these

parts. Two weeks, a month before he headed back to urban life?

"I'm trying to find Mustang Road. All I know is that this isn't it." He had a nice grin, friendly and unguarded, but it didn't reach his eyes. Probably a story there, but she didn't care to know it. Likely as not he wouldn't be around long enough, and besides, whatever it was, it was personal.

She wasn't exactly the type of girl any guy went for. "It's Mustang Lane, and you are about as lost as a soul can get, Sheriff. You need to backtrack to the main county road. Stay on the pavement until you hit the other side of our spread."

"And I would know that how?"

"It's the first intersecting road you come to. You have a dazed look on your face. Where are you from?"

"Chicago."

"I'm guessing you haven't seen so much open land except in an old Western?"

"I noticed it on the plane when I flew out to interview, but I kept close to town. Didn't get a chance to wander off the main street."

"Out here it's mostly ranches, rangeland and cattle. You've got to keep an eye on cows, or don't you know? They're going to tear your vehicle apart."

"What?" He whipped around. Sure enough, the mammoth black-and-white creatures had abandoned their grazing to gnaw on his four-wheel drive. They clustered around it like a mob, mouths and tongues and teeth bent on destruction. One cow tried to pry the wiper off the windshield, another chewed on the side-view mirror. Several leaned through the open window licking the seats. Another pulled a clean T-shirt out of his duffel and waved it in the wind like a prize.

“Shoo!” He didn’t know the first thing about cattle in real life, but he’d read plenty of Westerns where they were easy to scare into a stampede—not that he wanted a stampede, but this was a dire situation. He was responsible for that vehicle. How was he going to explain teeth marks to the town council? “Get up. Move along, little dogie.”

The entire herd swiveled their heads in unison to study him curiously. Not one of them was the least bit scared. Not a single hoof shifted. The animals returned to chewing, licking and digging through his possessions as if he were no threat at all.

“Move along, little dogie?” The woman on the horse laughed, a warm and wonderful sound. She dropped her reins, her hands at her stomach, watching him as if he was the funniest thing she’d ever seen. “That was a good one. I needed that.”

“Glad to help out.” He might be inexperienced with cows, but he understood hard work. “Tough day?”

“Tough and long.” She swiped her eyes. “Sorry, didn’t mean to poke fun at you. Do you know *anything* about cattle?”

“Not in real life.” There was a lot he could tell her, but he didn’t. He rather liked the way she watched him with a crook of a grin and a look as if to say she had seen this before. Let her think what she wanted. He gave his hat a tug and turned his attention to her. “I read a lot of Westerns. Or, I did when my granddad was alive. He got me hooked on them. We would sit and read side by side for hours at a time.”

“You must miss him.”

“He passed on about eight years back, and yeah, I still miss him.”

“I know how that is.” She’d lost her mom when she’d