



Ultimate Cowboy (Bucking Bronc Lodge Book 6)

By Rita Herron

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Rancher Brody Bloodworth has spent years blaming himself for his brother's disappearance. If he hadn't snuck off to be with Julie Whitehead, everything would have been different—and he wouldn't have pushed her away. Now Julie is back, as an FBI agent with a solid lead on his brother. Although the past makes Brody reluctant to fall for Julie again, he admires her for being unable to keep her hands off the case. Before long he finds himself unable to keep his hands off her. As he prepares for a showdown with the ruthless kidnappers, Brody knows what's at stake if he wins. And just how much he'll lose if he doesn't....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Award-winning author Rita Herron wrote her first book when she was twelve, but didn't think real people grew up to be writers. Now she writes so she doesn't have to get a real job. A former kindergarten teacher and workshop leader, she traded storytelling to kids for writing romance. She lives in Georgia with her own romance hero. She loves to hear from readers, so please visit her website, www.ritaherron.com.

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"This special news report just in—an amber alert has been issued for six-year-old Hank Forte. Hank was last seen at the county fair in Amarillo."

Brody Bloodworth's heart clenched as a photo of the boy appeared on screen. The little boy had blond hair, was wearing a black T-shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. He could be one of the kids on the BBL, the Bucking Bronc Lodge he had started for needy children.

But he reminded him more of his own little brother, Will, and launched him back seven years ago to the day Will had gone missing.

Not from a county fair but from the rodeo where *he* was supposed to be watching him.

Self-loathing and guilt suffused him, once again robbing his lungs of air. He understood what the family of that little boy was going through now. The panic. The fear.

The guilt.

If only they'd kept a better eye on him. If only they hadn't turned their head for a minute.

What was happening to him? Had he just wandered off? Would they find him hiding out or playing somewhere at the fair? Maybe he had fallen asleep in a stall housing one of the animals...

Or had someone taken him? Maybe a desperate woman who'd lost a child and was out of her mind? A child predator who'd do God knows what?

A killer?

The reporter turned the microphone to Hank's parents, a couple who were huddled together, teary-eyed and frightened. A second later, they began to plead for their son's return, and the mother broke down into sobs.

Brody hit the remote, silencing the heart-wrenching scene, but it played over and over in his head. But it wasn't the Forte family's cries he heard; it was his own family's.

His father who'd blamed him from the get-go.

Because it was his fault.

He glanced through the window at the sprawling acres and acres of land he'd bought, to the horse stables and

pens and the boys that he'd taken in. All kids who had troubles, boys who needed homes and love and guidance.

But no matter how much he did for them, it wouldn't make up for losing his little brother.

The clock in the hall struck 6:00 p.m., and he stood, pulled on his duster jacket and headed outside. One of his best men, Mason Blackpaw, and his fiancée, Cara Winchester, were getting married on the ranch in a few minutes. He'd promised he'd be there, and he was happy for his friend, but weddings always made him uncomfortable.

And he'd attended a hell of a lot of them lately. In fact, all of his original investors had tied the knot. First Johnny Long, then Brandon Woodstock, Carter Flagstone, then Miles McGregor, and now Mason.

Yanking at his tie to loosen the choking knot, he glanced at the field to the right where Mason had built a gazebo. Cara had rented tables and chairs and had decorated them with white linens, bows and fresh day lilies.

Half wishing he could skip the ceremony, he started to turn and go back inside, but Mason strode up to the steps of the gazebo then glanced his way with a smile.

Brody forced one in return. He couldn't let his foul mood ruin his friend's day.

Still, it was all he could do to put on a congenial face as he took a seat in the back row. Weddings made him think of Julie Whitehead, the only girl he'd ever loved.

The girl he'd snuck off to make out with at the rodeo, leaving his brother alone and unprotected.

In the panicked and horrible days after Will had disappeared, he'd lashed out at Julie. He'd blamed her.

But it was really himself he hated.

Dammit, that news report had stirred it all up again, all the haunting memories. He needed to check the database for missing and exploited children, make sure Will's information was still there.

Over the years, he'd focused on making sure local law enforcement agencies as well as statewide ones didn't give up looking. Even all these years later, he still had hope he'd find his brother.

Although that hope was harder to hold on to every day.

Worse, worry over what his brother had suffered ate at him constantly.

Still, he had to know if he was dead or alive.

Special Agent Julie Whitehead ran her finger over the embossed wedding invitation from Cara Winchester and Mason Blackpaw, then tossed it into the trash. She had worked with Mason on the Slasher case along with Detective Miles McGregor, tracking down a notorious serial killer who'd committed horrific crimes against women. During the case, they'd made friends, but she couldn't bear to attend the couple's wedding—not when it was taking place on the Bucking Bronc Lodge.

Not when Brody Bloodworth would probably attend.

After all, he was the founder of the ranch for troubled boys, a project she whole-heartedly admired, but he was also the man who'd broken her heart. Even after seven years, the thought of seeing him again tore her in knots.

Of course, she hadn't blamed him for hating her after his little brother had disappeared. If it hadn't been for her selfishness, her eagerness to seduce him away from the rodeo, he would have been with Will, and the little boy never would have disappeared.

She'd never forgiven herself for that.

And she'd made it her sole mission in life to see that one day he was found.

The very reason she'd joined the TBI.

Agent Jay Cord, one of the agents who specialized in missing children cases, cursed as he strode over to her desk. "Dammit, did you hear that another little boy went missing?"

Julie's lungs tightened. "Hank Forte. I feel so bad for that family." Memories of the torturous hours after Will's disappearance flashed back. "Any leads?"

"We're still questioning all the workers at the fair, but so far nothing."

She squeezed the stress ball on her desk, knowing the routine all too well. The family was always suspect, a fact that appalled her on their behalf and made her sick at the same time because a large percentage of the time they were guilty.

Next on their suspect list—their friends and relatives. The police and TBI would look into financials, search for motives, the whole time putting out feelers for pedophiles, ex-cons and mental patients. Then the wait for a ransom call. And what to do then?

And if one didn't come...the terrible realization that their child might be dead. "The parents check out?" she asked.

"So far. Both seem devastated. No financial problems. No custody issues. No enemies that they know of."

Julie frowned, thinking of all the cases they'd seen. The first forty-eight hours were crucial. Every second after lessened the chances they would find the child alive.

"I'm headed to Amarillo now," Jay said. "Want to grab a bite of dinner with me on the way? There's a great Italian place I've been wanting to try."

Julie offered him a smile and considered the offer. She knew Jay wanted more from her than friendship or to be coworkers. But even though she liked and admired him, she didn't have it in her heart to get involved with him.

Because your heart belongs to someone else.

No...because her heart had been broken, and she wouldn't take the chance on love again.

Still, maybe she should give him a shot.

Julie stood and reached for her jacket to go with him, but her section chief Lee Hurt, strode in. "Wait a minute, Whitehead. I've got another case for you."

Julie frowned. What could take precedence over looking for Hank Forte?

He strode to her computer, inserted a flash drive, then a second later clicked to open the file. Jay followed, probably wondering if it had to do with the Forte case.

"You've been looking for that kid William Bloodworth for years, haven't you?"

Julie narrowed her eyes. Was he going to reprimand her? "Yes."

"Take a look at this and tell me what you think."

Jay leaned closer and the two of them watched as feed from a security camera filled the screen. Two teenage boys wearing dark hoodies walked into a convenience store, combed the aisles until the few customers inside left, then approached the cashier. Their faces were shrouded in shadows from the hoods, but the taller one held a pistol on the clerk, then demanded all their cash.

"Why are we watching a petty robbery?" Jay asked.

Chief Hurt clicked an icon, and the camera closed in on the oldest boy. Julie's heart began to pound as his face came into focus.

"Oh, my God," she whispered. "Is it possible?"

Chief Hurt punched another set of keys. "Something about the face seemed familiar so I ran it through our databases, cross-referencing with photos from our missing kids' files and the facial recognition software program that keeps them updated."

Julie's stomach knotted as she watched the computer work its magic. The yearly updates of Will's picture as he'd progressed in age were displayed first, then a comparison shot of the boy at the convenience store and Will's latest sketch.

They were so similar her instincts surged to life.

"I can't believe it," Julie said, stunned. "We've been looking for Will Bloodworth for years, and if this is him, he's surfaced as a criminal?"

"We think it's a local gang," Chief Hurt said. "A group of boys have been robbing stores across Texas."

"Do you think someone bigger is behind it?" Julie asked.

Chief Hurt shrugged. "Maybe. That's what we have to find out."

"I have to tell Will's brother, Brody," Julie said. "He...never gave up hope that Will was alive."

Jay arched a brow. "You've kept in touch?"

Julie shook her head, a pang ripping through her. "No, but he sends an email periodically to the bureau asking for updates. He's kept his brother's name in front of us to make sure we don't stop looking for him."

Chief Hurt crossed his arms. "Cord, take Special Agent Harmon with you to Amarillo to work on the disappearance of the Forte boy. Whitehead, you're right. Go talk to this kid's brother, tell him what we've discovered."

Emotions pummeled Julie. She'd waited years for this moment, to be able to tell Brody that she'd found his brother. To somehow make right the wrong she'd done years ago.

"Maybe you can convince him to help us find his brother and bring him in," Hurt said. Julie's chest constricted.

Brody was going to be relieved, even thrilled, to know Will was alive.

But how would he feel when he learned the law wanted him? That once they found him, instead of coming home with him, he would probably go to jail?

Brody's cell phone buzzed just as Mason kissed the bride. Laughter and cheers erupted, and the boys from the ranch shifted, anxious for the food. Miles gave his wife a big kiss, which started a chain reaction with all the happy couples in the audience—once again, a reminder that Brody was alone.

Music echoed from the guitar, everyone cheered and clapped, but his phone buzzed again, spoiling the moment. He glanced at the number, ready to let it roll to voice mail. But then he saw the number on the caller ID.

The Texas Bureau of Investigation.

His heart stopped for a moment. He'd memorized that number long ago.

It might not be about Will, he told himself.

Still, hope surfaced. Along with fear.

He knew good and damn well that the call might mean his brother was dead.

The phone buzzed again, and he headed toward the porch as the preacher introduced Mr. and Mrs. Mason Blackpaw and the couple danced down the aisle toward the reception area.

Gritting his teeth, he punched Talk. "Brody Bloodworth speaking."

A breath whispered over the line, making him tense.

"Who is this?"

"Brody, it's Julie."

His breath stalled.

"Special Agent Julie Whitehead from the TBI," she continued, her voice slightly shaky.

Jesus, he'd heard she'd gone into law enforcement. Even read that she'd helped Mason and Miles find the serial killer who'd been cutting up women the last few months.

Picturing her in that role had been hard for him.

"Brody?"

"Yeah, I'm here," he said. "Just shocked to hear from you."

"I'm on my way to the BBL to see you," she said. "It's...about Will."

He closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose to stem the emotions assaulting him. God help him, he had thought he wanted answers.

Now, he wasn't so sure.

Outside, the festivities continued as Mason and Cara cracked open the champagne. Miles McGregor made a toast in celebration of the new life the couple were starting together. They were happy, smiling, looking forward to their future.

Something he hadn't done since that horrible day seven years ago.

Finally, he cleared his throat, willing himself to be strong. He'd waited years for this call; he had to know.

"You found him?"

"Yes, we think so," Julie said. "I'll explain when I arrive."

"Explain? What the hell does that mean?" All his pent-up anger, guilt and worry churned through him. "Just tell me, dammit, do you know where he is?"

"Not exactly," Julie said. "Like I said, I'll explain when I get there."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask the question that had tormented him every night since Will had disappeared, but he couldn't bring himself to.

Not yet.

Julie hung up, and he sat down on the porch swing and knotted his hands into fists and waited. There was no way he could join the celebration right now.

Instead, he watched for Julie's car, knowing she had the answers that he'd told himself he needed to move on with his life.

Only he'd been kidding himself.

The scenarios that screamed through his head did nothing but make him feel sick inside. And the truth, no matter what it was, couldn't be pretty or Julie would have told him over the phone.

He had to brace himself for the worst. Trouble was he didn't know what would be more horrible—finding out his brother was dead, or that he'd been held hostage and abused for years.

Julie admired the sprawling pastures and riding pens as she drove onto the BBL. She'd read about the ranch in the papers and seen pictures of the main house, cabins, stables, camp activities and counseling services offered by the ranch and had been stunned at what Brody had accomplished.

He'd always been a rough, hardworking cowboy and loved riding and roping, but he hadn't grown up wealthy. In fact, his mother had died when he was younger and his father had barely kept their small ranch going.

He'd also blamed Brody when Will had disappeared, destroying his relationship with his son. She wondered if they'd made up before his father had died.

If not, she knew that Brody carried that sting with him.

Maybe it was the reason he'd started the BBL.

She'd also followed the story featuring him as one of the wealthiest ranchers in Texas now. He'd worked his way up on other ranches, made some good investments, and accumulated a fortune.

But instead of letting that wealth go to his head, he'd devoted a huge portion of it to this ranch. He'd also become a role model for troubled boys, which impressed her even more.

She watched several quarter horses running freely in the pasture and smiled. The sight of the animals reminded her of her own dreams when she was young.

She'd wanted to be a vet. Had imagined her and Brody marrying and having a small spread and children. And of course, she would take care of the animals.

A deep throbbing took root in her chest and wouldn't let go. Those had been a teenager's foolish fantasies.

Again, she glanced at the horses with their beautiful manes dancing in the wind.

Anything to distract her from the task ahead.

And from the idea of seeing Brody again.

God, she had loved him so much.

And he had loved her.

Users Review

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