

EVERLEE WHITMAN

*From Their
Toil*



BOOK

1

LOVING RIVER RANCH
ROMANCE SERIES

Loving River Ranch

Romance Series

From Their Toil

Book 1

Everlee Whitman

From Their Toil

Book One of the Loving River Ranch Romance Series by
Everlee Whitman

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Ecclesiastes 3 9-14 (NIV)

What do workers gain from their toil? 10 I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. 12 I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. 13 That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in their toil—this is the gift of God. 14 I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

About the Author

Everlee lives in a very rural, Western Michigan community where the only stoplight in the county was placed to provide an appropriate driver's training experience. Her love for the outdoors is evident in her rural homestead residence in the middle of the woods near the Lake Michigan Shoreline. She is a proficient baker, once owning her own cookie company. Other hobbies include gardening, camping, and of course, reading. Everlee has been married for 34 years and enjoys her three adult children and three grandchildren, with the hope that more grandchildren will be on their way in the next few years.

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Chapter 1

Brigitta got out of the sports car and felt her breath intake harshly as she glanced over the overgrown vegetation in all directions. The massive amount of land encompassing the ranch she inherited was much wilder in nature than she had anticipated. It was hard to even make out the old buildings properly through the tangled and high vegetation in all directions. After so many years, she had expected it to be a bit wild, but this defied even her expectations.

She moved to the trunk to switch out her nice flats for a pair of old boots she had brought along, as Brigitta had the foresight not to know what she might be facing today. As she readied to survey the land in front of her, she raised her eyes toward the heavens. She wondered what her mom and grandparents thought of this crazy idea.

She had never known her biological father in life, as he died in a conflict in another country before her birth. Brigitta had to wonder if he and her mother were happy to see each other after all this time. Her stepfather, Bruce, had taken loving care of her mom, but through all these years, it had been evident he was not the love that impacted her the most, Brigitta's father had been. Brigitta, for her part, had never gotten along overly well with Bruce or his son Landon as she had been eight when they united the families in marriage. While she had worked hard to make nice with Landon, who was only two months older than her, they were like oil and water.

Then her mom got sick while Brigitta was in college. It had been a challenging time, and to not cause issues in her extended family, Brigitta learned to keep the peace, sometimes at the cost of her happiness. Since her mom passed, she learned about this piece of land that her mother's family had held onto for generations. These hundred acres had been uninhabited since her grandfather's passing, but her mom never let it go...that was meaningful to Brigitta. Bruce, Landon, and even her friends thought she should finally sell it

and pad her future. She already had more than enough for all her goals, with the trust fund released to her just months before. She also didn't think she needed to give it away without seeing the land, which had been important enough for some reason that her mother had never disposed of the property herself.

There was something so comforting about this piece of land. It was handed down through her family for four generations. So it seemed like a tie to her past. The moment she had learned about this place, knowledge of how it should be used formed clearly in her mind. She had called an old college friend that promised to be out here to meet her shortly, and then...only then...would Brigitta make some final decisions.

She turned when a vehicle sounded behind her, and a smile crossed her face. Even back in college, Margaret was a stickler for time management, so she had expected she would arrive right on time. A moment later, she watched Margaret step down from the big SUV. Brigitta moved toward her with arms open as they heartily embraced each other.

“Good to see you,” Brigitta said with tears as Noah and Annabeth rounded the vehicle. “You are so big,” she said to Annabeth. The last time I got a picture, she was still a toddler,” Brigitta gushed, and she leaned in to hug Noah.

“I like hugs,” Matthew came forward.

Brigitta adored Margaret's brother Matthew the few times they had met. Previously, he had been followed around by a sheep named Babe, and he was one of the sweetest souls she had ever met.

“I know you do,” Brigitta said as she hugged Margaret's twin brother.

“This is Hazel,” Matthew said as another sweet-looking woman came from behind him. “She is my love.”

“Nice to meet you,” Brigitta said as she held out her hand.

“I hug people also if they are okay with that,” Hazel said and grabbed her close before fully getting a response.

Brigitta felt big emotions with this entire group as she turned toward the property. She had this overwhelming feeling that this vision of hers could be made into a reality, and this was the group that had the abilities and grace to see her goals come to fruition.

“So, what do you think?” Brigitta asked, holding her arms out wide. “It’s a bit rough.”

Noah laughed heartily, causing Brigitta to turn to him. He was glancing over all the space but shaking his head simultaneously. She wondered what the tall, stoic man was thinking looking over this place.

“Rough is a nice way to put it?” Noah said. “But that means much potential. Sorry, I remember when we converted Living River Ranch and that one at least was a functioning family operation before. This is definitely going to be a lot of work just getting land cleared and ready to be built up.”

“Let’s walk if that is okay,” Margaret said. “You have how many acres?”

“One hundred.”

“It needs some animals,” Matthew said.

“You know I couldn’t agree more,” Brigitta laughed lightly. “You can help me figure out how to build some barns and what animals if you are up for it?”

“Definitely,” Matthew sighed.

“So, are you thinking of a duplicate of Living River or more of the teens and other ranches you discussed?” Margaret asked.

“I would love to allow some boarding and internships for kids and focus on giving back in that arena,” Brigitta replied with a sigh. “I feel like my brother Trevor could be honored with what we do here, and my mother. Of course, I want to help in other ways, but with Living River Ranch only an hour from here, I was hoping to complement services and not completely duplicate.”

“I love that idea,” Margaret sighed. “I think we can evaluate every aspect and then make those choices. I would love to involve many others at Living River Ranch to help make some suggestions.”

“Anything would be helpful,” Brigitta replied. “I’m overwhelmed at even where to start.”

They walked toward the first big building, which had once been a working barn. The doors hung on their hinges, and you could see inside through the wood slats.

“You will need to survey the land, some architectural drawings for new buildings, and evaluate those that might be refurbished,” Noah sighed. “I would recommend that we first bring someone in to clear the main areas at a minimum so we can see everything underneath. I think it has been at least thirty years without any maintenance.”

“It’s a big project, isn’t it,” Brigitta said as they continued out through the high grasses, abandoned farming implements, and years of deteriorated land left to its own devices.

“Yes. Very big,” Matthew said. “I like it.”

Brigitta turned to him with a chuckle. She loved that Matthew had never learned to filter what he was thinking. He was a happy soul that made you grin when he was around.

“It is a lot,” Margaret said as they stopped walking and turned toward each other. “Money, time, and patience are going to be needed. We have many grants that could be applied for, though, resources that helped with our operations and things that can help. What happened to you keeping a job at a financial firm in the city?”

Brigitta looked around, thinking about how to best answer that question. She knew she lived a blessed life of money, education, and a satisfying career; even her own home had been built to her specifications. This was the opposite of that. It would be manual labor, long nights, troubled people to help, and even rough living accommodations. The satisfaction and a sense of purpose felt like a good trade-off.

“I’m ready and committed to this,” she said, turning to look over the land.

This time all she saw was the potential of this unspoiled land. She would make something extraordinary come to life again in this spot that had long been held in trust by her family. She would make them all proud and hopefully give back in a big way to other people’s lives along the way.

Chapter 2

After finishing a site survey for a new office building in San Francisco, Riggs was headed back to town. His job was one that he loved more than anything he could imagine. He used all his engineering and research skill sets to put together these site surveys for developers and people looking to build, expand or rehab properties from one end of the country to the other. Then, over a year ago, he found this fantastic website that allowed him to bid on jobs and no longer work for a company. That immediately gave him much more freedom in his schedule as he could dictate when he worked and when he didn't.

Additionally, having moved to the boondocks of Michigan, his living cost was much less than when he lived in the big city. He loved the peace after a hectic week spent in California traffic. He was a bit of a recluse these days, having been the victim of a violent crime and then his fiancée leaving him six years ago when she didn't think he 'manned up in a way that he should during the commission of the home invasion. The ridiculous circumstances and the single night played like a bad movie loop in his head more often than he cared to recount. But, after many years of hindsight in the rearview mirror of that day, he knew beyond all doubt that things worked out the way they were supposed to.

Samantha wanted a big, expensive, jet-setting life. But, when he was back in college, what had seemed like a wonderful idea turned dreary after a while. The total pursuit of money, power, and position got lost on him, and he quickly wearied of it. After the home invasion episode, he was done with big-city living and wanted to return to his roots. He might not have had a relationship since, but his career was promising; he had the best hiking, fishing, and peaceful sceneries to come home to anywhere.

As he rambled up the road in his pickup, he glanced over to see the old farm that was the backyard of his house. Of course, it was over a hundred acres and had never been

occupied a day of his time here in this small town. He had been told that the family moved about thirty years ago, and the kids and grandkids didn't want to work the land. He noticed two different vehicles: a large SUV and a sports car. He furrowed his brow at that sight as both of them together out in the abandoned area was odd. He thought about driving by because he didn't want strangers doing something untoward on the land surrounding his land, so he turned down the overgrown gravel road.

He glanced about the truck's cab to see what he might have to defend himself should something terrible happen. As he worked the way up the old drive, he spent a fair amount of time chastising himself about leaping into a situation where Riggs had no idea what he would find on the other end of this drive. Sure, it was rare that someone dangerous or doing something illegal came upon their town, but this was a good way off the beaten trail. Furthermore, it wasn't easy to know if someone might have purposefully picked that location for a meeting due to the remote site.

As he pulled up behind the cars, he finally caught a glimpse of the people that were touring the location. None of them looked like anything but straight-up ordinary people. A quick headcount told him there were five adults and a child at first count. They did appear to have come from the land and barns area.

Riggs exited the truck as a beautiful brunette that looked well-kept and kind of high-maintenance started toward his direction. He took the opportunity to watch her and decided that she wasn't here for anything nefarious...though his curiosity was piqued at her presence on this desolate piece of land. The lady had a wide-open smile, and he could feel attraction triggering in the pit of his stomach with each step she took toward him. Unfortunately, he was feeling all out of sorts when she was within a few feet of his location.

"Hi," the brunette stopped in front of him. "I'm Brigitta Shelton," she said, pushing her hand in his direction to shake.

"Riggs Thatcher," he said, pumping her hand. He could feel the contact up his arm, but he found himself in a sour

mood, trying to ignore the weird reaction to the lady. “This is private property,” he grouched. “I just wanted to check out why there are vehicles here for the first time in nearly the decade I have resided in the town.”

“I know it is private property,” Brigitta said in a bright, shiny tone that made him bob his head back.

“Hi, I’m Margaret,” another lady said, walking up to them. “Do you live around these parts?”

“Yes, I live here on the west side of the ranch lands. The land backs right up to mine. I was returning to town from a contract I did in California,” he said, feeling that he was oversharing information. “I have to say that this is the first time I’ve seen someone out here.

“I own this ranch,” Brigitta informed him as his stomach tensed up to a painful level. “I unfortunately just found out about this property when my mother passed.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Riggs replied to her, though he was reeling from that information drop. He didn’t understand what an obvious city girl would be doing on the land. Maybe curiosity got the better of her, and she wanted to see her inheritance up close. He didn’t know but figured she wouldn’t be sticking around long.

“So, what do you do for a living that takes you out of town to California?” Margaret interjected before any other information could be swapped with Brigitta.

“I do site surveys for developers and individuals considering building up a piece of land. For instance, you have some property you wish to put a high rise on and need to know the feasibility and return on investment. Or maybe you have an idea for a business and need me to lay out the architecture, infrastructure, and other factors to ensure how it will work, or sometimes, it simply won’t work,” he said, giving the canned explanation.

He noticed Margaret turned to Brigitta, who looked like someone had just sucker-punched her. They looked shocked as they glanced between each other and then back to him. He

didn't understand what was going on or what his job might have to do with it.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asked, hoping this odd interaction would end soon. He was tired and just wanted this group gone. He could get home, shower, eat and sleep off the trip in peace.

“No, but I think you might be an answer to a prayer,” Margaret said, though his eyes landed on Brigitta. She was now looking at him expectantly, and he felt goosebumps on his arms. Not once to date had he been called an answer to a prayer, and the nervous energy pumping through his system jumped a notch.

“That's not how things normally work for me,” Riggs said, feeling like he had an odd out-of-body experience.

“See, I'm thinking about revitalizing this land for a new project that would serve youth, veterans, and such with therapies, camps, and other services,” Brigitta said. “Margaret runs the Living River Ranch about an hour from here and has graciously provided her insights. Before we know if this is even something to pursue, a feasibility and infrastructure survey would need to be done. It sounds like you literally just answered the prayer for our first order of business.”

“I've read articles about the therapy you all do at Living River Ranch, and it is amazing,” he said, glancing at Margaret. “And you want to do something like that here?” he asked, glancing at Brigitta. He looked her up and down and didn't see this citified, elegant-looking woman here in this small Michigan town helping others. Something didn't quite add up.

“I need to do this,” Brigitta said, staring at him hard. “I want to give back and leave a legacy that my grandfather, who lived here, and my mother would approve of. My mom never sold or disposed of this land. Lately, I've been at odds with all the blessings in my life. I have it easy, and so many others don't. I can fix that, but it will take an army to make that happen,” she said cocking her head to the side at him.

He found himself genuinely fixating on that statement for a moment. There was no deception in Brigitta's eyes, and he

sensed the depth of her commitment to this project. He turned for a moment and paced. This was how he tended to work through issues. Normally, he could hit the open trails and hike off his stress, but right now, this was what he could muster.

He didn't have any idea coming into town that this would be how the day ended. Searching his mind, he realized all the complimenting new articles on Living River Ranch. He even recognized Margaret and his husband Noah standing behind her, not yet introduced, but they did have a picture in the article Riggs had read. He also knew that that group was a giant in its ability to impact many people positively. He felt some prayers about his purpose of late might have the potential to be heard and realized in this project.

Turning back to Brigitta and then glancing at Margaret, he inhaled. Typically, this is when he would turn tail and run. He wasn't the person that liked to get overly involved in this big passion project. On the other hand, he could help, and no apparent reason came to mind on how to graciously turn this down. There was only one thing he could find to do.

"What can I do to help?" he asked, glancing between the two women.

"We have some preliminary ideas but need a full site survey, feasibility study, and feedback to know what it would take," Brigitta responded.

"I can do that," he said with a bounce.

"We can work on the pieces of this project," Margaret replied.

"And then a quote about your fees," Brigitta interjected.

"I have a feeling this is a cause for me and not an invoice," he said as Brigitta, and he stood deep in each other's gaze.

"Let's tour," Noah replied, moving forward. "Noah," he said, holding out a hand.

"Nice to meet you," Riggs said as she shook his hand.

"Matthew," another guy came forward as Riggs started to smile.

Any tiredness after this last contract evaporated, and he was engaged with this group. With a small eye roll toward heaven, he was grateful he thought to stop. Something about this moment seemed so big all of a sudden. Humble happiness descended on his shoulders, and he felt this would be a new and different type of adventure for him.

Chapter 3

Brigitta rose before sunlight could get through the blinds of the hotel room, stretched, and fairly bounded from the room. She was excited to get out to the property and get on with the first day of Riggs surveying. Additionally, she had hired some help to start clearing the land. No matter the land survey, much clean-up work needed to be undertaken out there. She was feeling on top of the world until she glanced at the phone and saw three new missed messages from Bruce. For whatever reason, the man was struggling to let go of dictating her life. He was her stepfather, and she had deferred to him to keep the peace with her mother. Now that the tie between them was irretrievably broken, she didn't want to kowtow to him any longer and maybe take a breather from his heavy-handed oversight.

Not that she blamed him or wanted to start drama. Bruce had controlled finances, education, vacations, and the like for several years. Even as she selected colleges and a career, he had much input. The man had allowed her mother not to worry about such things and live a peaceful, relatively easy life. For that alone, Bruce was not worthy for her to dump on. However, this property seemed to be something he wished to discuss based on a text she read – and that was off the table.

“Good morning,” a waitress with a name tag that declared her name Gemma greeted Brigitta. “How are you today?”

“Glorious, thank you,” Brigitta replied. “I need some breakfast, of course, but I also need to get some additional work clothes and didn't know if there was a place in town?”

“There is a thrift store right around the corner on Maple Street,” Gemma replied. “I love that place, but some also enjoy the general feed store called Murphy's up the road,” she wrinkled her nose. “I just think that you don't get as much choice. Basic jeans, flannel, and some t-shirts,” the sweet girl finished.

“Actually, I will try both, thanks.”

“I heard that Riggs is going to be helping you out there on that big farm project,” Gemma said, leaning in closer.

Brigitta just stared at the lady, trying to figure out how the waitress knew about her project. She lived in a city where everyone just managed their own lives, but here people seemed a lot more invested in everything going on around town. She would have to get used to that dynamic as she became more embedded into the town. As for Riggs, Brigitta was not prepared to discuss that with someone, as her feelings weren't in check yet, and she had only just met the man.

She had a solid record of being single and had never met anyone that might change her opinion on that topic. Caring for her mom, building her career, and even some travel all topped Brigitta's list of to-do items until recently. That was until the moment Riggs landed on her ranch lands, with a look of protective interest on that stunningly handsome face. He was there to ensure Margaret, Noah, and herself were not some kind of criminals, and she had found it endearing that he cared enough to make an effort. After hearing about it, it shocked her when he decided to engage in the project. The thought of working alongside him, even for a few days at a time, was making her feel light-headed. However, it turned out after their first meeting yesterday that he was friendly, extremely intelligent, and a great resource to get the groundwork for this project solidly in place.

“He is doing the site survey for the feasibility of all the plans I would like to execute on that land that I inherited,” Brigitta remarked, trying to keep the explanation free of the emotions raging inside. “He seems like a good guy, if not a little uptight and a rule follower.”

“A rule follower? Is that a bad thing?” Riggs's voice sounded from behind Brigitta as she glanced at Gemma's face, which turned red. The sweet girl mouthed silently toward Brigitta, ‘I'm sorry.’

Brigitta shook her head at the waitress. “Can I get some coffee and those buckwheat pancakes I had the other day?”

“With blackberries?” Gemma asked, as Brigitta simply nodded her head.

Brigitta’s heart tripped heavily, and she felt the impact of Riggs standing next to her booth a moment later. She turned to look up at the tall frame as she was in a seated position. She was not someone that backed down easily from the kind of challenge she saw radiating from his gaze. He had caught her talking about him, and she would probably need to own up to that mistake. Though luckily, she hadn’t said anything too awful.

“Morning,” she said with a bright smile, hoping it hid the discord that was raging inside. “Care to have a seat?” she asked, inclining her hand to the booth across the table.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Riggs offered. “You know you don’t have to do the hard work on the ranch. I can just walk the property myself and rid you of my rule-following ways,” he said, making her realize that he had overheard the topic of clothing earlier.

“I don’t want to be hands-off on this,” Brigitta remarked. “This is a massive life change for me, and I want to enjoy every moment of the adventure. And just for the record, being a rule follower isn’t a bad thing.”

“I heard women normally like the wild and free men,” he said, holding her gaze in his own.

“Luckily, I’m not considering you as possible dating material,” she quipped right back at him.

“Ow,” he said, making a stabbing gesture above his heart. “What did possess you to do this, if you don’t mind me asking?” Riggs asked, furrowing his brow in her direction. “I get the feeling from the sports car you drive to your nicer clothing that living the ranch life is new for you.”

Brigitta giggled a bit. “You aren’t wrong.”

“My stepdad provided us a nice life ruled by networking, good education, and travel to amazing places. I did have a nice trust left by my father and my mother’s family, including the land you know of here,” Brigitta said, glancing out the

window as she more thoroughly thought about the question. “Have you ever felt like your life is just not what you want? That there is no purpose to what you are doing?” she turned to look at him.

He just stared back for a moment and then nodded.

“I actually do know that feeling well,” he sighed. “I lived a life like yours where I graduated from college, got a great job, and lived in a high-rise condo in the city. I had a beautiful fiancée and a life that most people would look at with envy,” he said with a head nod. “Then, one night, this home invasion made me truly look at what was important in life, and that life was not what I wanted for the rest of my days. I moved here, found this new role with contracts I could control, and spent time in nature, giving back to a smaller community of people I knew and just live.”

Brigitta smiled at him. “Did you leave the positive attitude back in the city? I mean, you are a little brusque,” she said as he laughed aloud.

“Honestly, I am not rude or short with people,” he said, thinking about what she said. “I might sometimes just take care of business and not be as social as you appear.”

“You win more friends and influence with honey,” she challenged, sticking her chin out stubbornly.

Gemma dropped food on the table and skittered away from them. It was sort of funny because she thought that maybe they were fighting or something. They weren’t, but Brigitta had to admit it was one of the feistiest conversations she had participated in for quite some time.

“I will say you need to influence many people to get this momentous project off the ground,” he remarked. “How did you find Living River Ranch, Margaret, and hatch this massive undertaking?”

Brigitta smiled at him, “I went to college with her, and while our degree programs were different, we shared several classes. She had this big purpose in life with taking over the reins of Living River Ranch; we are determined to name this

ranch Loving River Ranch with this partnership. I want that sense of purpose and to change others' lives. I want this legacy to honor both my mother and my grandfather. I believe they left this land for me to do something great with, and the first thought I had when I learned about this inheritance was to call Margaret, and I just knew this was the right thing to do."

"Wow," Riggs sighed. "You know, every time I talk to you, I get more determined to help you. I might need to keep my distance, or you will have me designing buildings and sucked into this long-term," he sighed with a grin in her direction.

She fell into those eyes and knew that she was hopeful Riggs would be sticking around. He was amazing, and something continued to draw her to him.

"We shall see how things unfold," Brigitta said. "But know I have much work ahead and will do anything to sweet talk people into helping that can move that mission forward."

"Fair enough," he said, tipping the coffee cup in her direction in the way of toasting her statement.

She grabbed the syrup and doused her pancakes. She was delighted and had a good feeling that Riggs would be a huge part of this undertaking of getting a new ranch off the ground.

Chapter 4

Riggs needed to do some measuring, and even with the sun going down after the business call finished, he put on his boots and headed out to Brigitta's ranch. He knew a sense of urgency to complete that project and wanted to come through for her. Honestly, he was getting nearly as worked up as she was over this amazing project as it started to come to life in the drawings and comments she was working on, along with him. The number of jobs it would bring to his small town would be life-changing for many.

Additionally, it would bolster the economy in a town that had suffered a bit in the new economy of people buying online. There wasn't much but nature and tourism to fuel the town except for the money from ranchers, farmers, and families working in other towns and making long commutes back here. Riggs appreciated the new life this endeavor would breathe into his home.

That said, along with progress, there was always a downside. More people in the community ran the risk of tainting that hometown feeling, and the tight-knit community could experience growing pains in the coming years. Could businesses support the expanded service needs, construction, and such that Loving River Ranch would bring? That was a question they were looking to answer in the confines of his feasibility study. Time was the only true test that would prove the hypothesis and see if the new massive undertaking would bear the fruit everyone was hoping it might.

His brain was awash with a million thoughts as he returned to the desolate land, which would hopefully flourish in the coming days. He was finding it hard to get Brigitta out of his head as much as it was the work he had to do. The woman was a conundrum to him and filled with contradictions. He hadn't wanted to get involved with anyone in a long time and preferred his freedom and solitude when not working. She was the first person in many years that made him question all sorts of things about his decisions, the world, and people in general.

Brigitta had a great life and all the comforts a person could need in life...and she still chose to take on this long, dirty path to a new purpose. Why? The question continued to plague him as she turned out to be a genuinely nice person, beautiful inside and out, making him wonder at her motives. She didn't seem to be hiding anything; something simply drove her to try and change the world for those less fortunate. It honestly was something he had seen in all sorts of little ways since arriving here years ago, but this magnitude was making an impact he hadn't expected.

When he got to the ranch, he noticed an SUV he hadn't seen before parked at the entrance to the ranch. He exited his truck and glanced over the land. Suddenly, he thought he saw a head sitting on the ground in the distance. He jumped from the truck and took off running. Hopefully, nothing was wrong, he thought, offering a quick prayer for guidance.

"Hey," he said, stopping short when he recognized Brigitta sitting on the ground, with her knees to her chest with tears rolling down her cheeks. He dropped beside her, "I see you got a new car," he said as it was the only thing that came to mind. He hadn't dealt with a bawling woman in years, and he was not equipped to handle it at this moment.

She turned to him with a laugh. "Yeah, the sports car was not working," she replied. "I traded it in even-even for that one, and it has much more reliable wheels, space for hauling, and other more useful tips for this type of project," she sighed. "My lovely stepfather found out about it when I had to call to get insurance documentation and gave me a thirty-minute talking to about the craziness of this plan," she sighed. "Here I keep thinking that someone will finally realize that I'm an adult who can make solid decisions. I guess the only person that believed in me is no longer here," she sighed and put her head on her knees.

"You are missing your mom today," Riggs asked.

"Yeah," she turned her head in his direction. "I just feel so lost. She was the absolute best; for the first years of my life, I didn't have anyone but her. My biological dad was military and came from family money. His family shut us out after he

passed and fought my mother over my trust. I don't know if it would have been better if she let it all go and I had that family or not," she sighed. "Then she met Bruce, and honestly, he did great by my mom. I didn't like always having every decision made for me, and we have butted heads a lot," she sighed as Riggs took it all in. "Did you have a good relationship with your family?"

"I did," he said, thinking back to his parents. "My parents were a bit older when they had me, so both passed before I was out of college. It was just them and me, though, so we traveled and read together, and honestly, I had an amazing childhood. They ensured I could go to a good school, and I was determined to be this big-shot architect," he sighed. "I guess we all think we know what we need when we are younger, but life has a way of testing that resolve in ways we didn't expect. Sometimes those trials push us in a direction we didn't anticipate," he sighed, looking out at the sunset sinking into the horizon.

"Do you regret giving it all up and moving out here?" Brigitta asked him in a quiet tone that made him hesitate.

"No, I haven't ever regretted it," he said, furrowing his brow at her. "You know you don't have to go through with this, right?" he asked, finding himself moving a strand of her hair out of her eyes so he could look her deadpan in the face.

"I know," she said. "I have been at my wit's end for years now and never felt like I fit in the life I was living," she told him. "When I found out about this land after mother passed, I felt like this was my chance. I was sitting in the house one night, grieving her and trying to figure out what came next... praying more than I have in years. That's when this text from Margaret dinged on my phone, and I can't even explain it... this plan formed in my head. Over the next week, I just couldn't shake it, and I was like a madman researching everything I could about Living River Ranch. Finally, there was this thing that just clicked," she said, hitting her index finger against her temple. "Even now, I love this project and know there is a long path ahead. I have not had a single doubt, but everyone I talk to fills my head with the negative. Not one

person, lawyer, financial advisor, stepfather, or friend believes in this,” she sighed, shaking her head.

“I believe that was the same with Noah in the Bible,” he said, finding the story pop to mind. “I think we know how that turned out.”

Brigitta turned to him shaking her head. “I didn’t think of that story, but you aren’t wrong,” she said as he found himself drowning in those expressive eyes. “Do you think this is the wrong thing to do? If it was you, would you do this?”

That seemed like a massive landmine that didn’t appear to have a solid resolution. He didn’t want to render such a massive opinion after a short time of knowing the woman. But, on the other hand, he had known the feeling of everyone disagreeing with his life choice. He knew that some assurances would have meant the world back then.

“I think you pray, do your research, and then do the best you can,” he returned to her quietly. “No one on planet Earth can tell you exactly what to do; only you and your conscience can make decisions you are comfortable with. I, for one, will do everything I can to give you the facts to base your decision on. You aren’t doing this light-heartedly or foolhardily in any manner. I think you are doing pretty well gathering a great support network and the right resources to make this a positive outcome. Anyone who says it is a bad idea must ask themselves if they are looking from your perspective or their lens?”

Brigitta’s head was bobbing in agreement by the time he finished. “Thanks. I agree. I’m not doing this on a whim like others might think. I am putting as much upfront work into the planning as I can to ensure the best success. I’ll listen if someone can give me a valid reason for this being wrong. You aren’t wrong; even Bruce cautioned me because this is not a money-making venture. He has always invested his time and energies into such, so he doesn’t understand it.”

“Even with him, it could be coming from a good place, just wrongly expressed,” he said. “No matter, we will get you all the right information, and then maybe down the road, you can

have a heart-to-heart with him, and that data in hand. It might change his mind.”

“I know this wasn’t your choice to get involved at first, but I appreciate your dedication to this endeavor,” she sighed. “I have a feeling you and me might end up the best of friends yet,” she said.

He just stared at her as his heart acknowledged that it might end up being a lot more than friends on his part. The woman had integrity and so much passion for what she did. Right now, was not the time to add anything else to her plate. The end goal plan would work out in time if they were the end goal plan. At the very least, though, friends he definitely could commit to.

“I think you could be right,” he said as they sunk into silence, sitting side by side and watching the final rays of the sun sink into the hills beyond.

Chapter 5

Brigitta was smiling as she watched the team that had cleared most of the part of the ranch that hosted buildings. There were three old barns, three sheds, an old farmhouse, and many implements and other debris that had just been left. Once the vegetation was gone, it was pretty evident how much stuff had just been left by those that lived here previously. The team that Noah had sent over from Living River Ranch had brought trailers, and this was the fourth day of full trailers of trash being removed, and it was looking much more livable by the moment.

“Wow, this is looking so good,” Margaret said, walking up behind her. “I think we have all the information needed, and I will start getting the grants written. Additionally, Riggs has done amazing work with the feasibility study and has a ton of good information already written for us,” she said, glancing at Brigitta. “You know that you are nearly at the point of no return. Once we break ground and start construction, the avalanche will start,” she said with a chuckle. “It was like Living River Ranch took on a life of its own once we started to give it a new purpose. People came out of the woodwork to help, grants started coming in, the news covered the stories, and soon, the clients were coming in hordes. I promise your services here will be booked. The overflow from those we simply can’t service due to the needs, or our capacity will fill your ranch,” she said. “You will change the landscape of this entire community, and even you won’t be the same after this,” Margaret finished, not allowing her gaze to waver.

“Are you trying to scare me?” Brigitta asked, deeply inhaling as she cocked her head to Margaret. “Or do you think that I can’t do this? But, honestly, just give it to me straight because you aren’t wrong; this is the crossroads where big decisions lay in two very different directions.”

“Brigitta,” Margaret said with a softer smile. “I believe you can do anything you put your mind to, no question about that. I also know that I made this choice and poured blood,

sweat, and tears into changing the trajectory of my family's ranch forever. I don't regret it for one minute, and I'm grateful every day. I work seven days a week, even with an army of other people working the ranch and services. I also have hundreds of people who work for the ranch and clients who now depend on me. That is a huge responsibility I wish someone had more fully outlined for me before I started down the road."

"Would you have changed your decision?" Brigitta asked.

"No, I don't believe I would," Margaret said. "Though I might have scaled it differently and not grown so fast, so soon. But no, I don't have regrets."

"Do you have any reservations I can't do this?"

"No, I think you are bringing in the right people and resources and have the ability to make this happen," Margaret replied. "My only worry is that you have always lived a high-end lifestyle in a city."

"Oh, that has been a learning curve," Brigitta agreed with a comical nod. "I will agree that is one downside of everything I'm taking on. On the other hand, I did have to order some clothes, and the ease of shopping, getting a good latte, and the like will be a challenge." The two women chuckled. "I promise I'm weighing the pros and cons heavily," Brigitta said. "Let me get the final report from Riggs," she stopped as another car pulled up down the drive. She felt her heart stutter as anger raged through her midsection. "I will get back to you," she said, attempting to get Margaret out of there before the latest arrival started an issue.

Margaret looked from the car to Brigitta and back. "Are you good?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure this won't be pleasant," she said. "That would be my stepbrother Landon," she confessed.

"Okay. Give me a call if you need to chat or have any additional questions," Margaret said, reaching out to squeeze her arm. "You got this," she reaffirmed as she headed back to her vehicle.

Brigitta turned her eyes toward heaven to steady herself as Landon launched out of what must be a rental. As he started toward her, she noticed him remove his sunglasses and glance around with a slight wrinkle of his nose. She squared her shoulders and started in his direction, needing to get this over with quickly.

“Landon,” she greeted the man, “I didn’t expect ever to see you on a dilapidated ranch in rural Michigan.”

“Color me surprised,” Landon replied with a light chuckle. “I didn’t see this happening either, but I’ve spoken to father, and he told me that I needed to come here to settle business with you. He didn’t figure you were willing to come back home to have a meeting at the company offices.”

“You would be right,” Brigitta remarked. “What is so urgent that you needed to track me here? I talked to your father, and I know that he thinks this is a bad idea and a waste of money. I am taking that information to heart and doing some due diligence before I make a final decision. There is nothing you can say that would tip the scales one way or the other,” she said, but she noticed he had an overconfident grin.

“Based on the intent of Mother’s will, I own a part of this land as well,” he remarked as anger seized Brigitta’s insides.

“We had the reading of the will, and this property is inheritance through my mother’s direct lineage,” she said, emphasizing that her mother was not biologically his. They both had legacies of their own and a joint one by marriage, and she was not going to allow him to try and muddy those waters. However, the truth was that she would not put it past him to try and contest something, just to do his father’s bidding. This was the last thing she anticipated or had expected. She inhaled quietly and then turned to him.

“What part of the will do you feel gives you a right to this land?” she asked, keeping the tone as even as humanly possible in these circumstances.

“The distribution of all other material assets not listed in the will. As the land was in her name, our attorney feels that it is part of that material assets,” he said with a grin. “I thought I

would like come out to look around, but I believe, like father, that we should put it on the market immediately. I do not want to sink a bunch of money into some feel-good scheme such as the one I heard you are pursuing,” he said, looking at Brigitta directly and leaving that proclamation sitting heavily between them.

“NO,” she said emphatically. “You know this land was listed in my grandfather’s will as passing to the oldest granddaughter as part of his last stated will. So, according to the attorneys, it would be predating to mother’s will,” she spat back at him, feeling kind of dirty having this kind of conversation about her family property and loved ones.

“I guess there is some interpretation to be had,” he said, “which means we might need mediation, but for certain, I intend to bar you from moving forward with this plan,” he said. “I’m sorry I don’t think I want to give up on something this lucrative just because you and your attorney say that is the case.”

“And your father is backing this play?” she asked, wanting to fully understand what she was facing.

“Definitely,” Landon remarked with a smirk.

“Understood,” I said, realizing that any hope of a relationship there died. The man was simply in this for the money, not caring about her feelings or her mother’s intentions. That was telling, and the very things that Brigitta was trying to get away from moving here.

“I guess I will get the attorneys on this,” she sighed.

“And you will leave the land today?”

“I have some last-minute work that should be finished,” she said. “I have paid for it, and it won’t change anything on your end.”

“Understood,” he remarked but didn’t look happy at all. “I guess I shall stay in town until we can leave together.”

“You don’t...,” she stopped as he raised his hand.

“I’m staying in town until you agree to leave with me, and that better be soon,” he said, pivoting and returning to the car.

She let her head drop back, hoping to stop the tears that enveloped her eyes. This was not what she needed right now, and the money spent fighting him would be better spent getting this project underway. She was determined not to allow this latest move to impede this project; she would need to head off the problem and figure out a solution. Offering a small prayer, she pulled the phone from her pocket and called Riggs to get him up to speed. They would get the survey down and halt until she could fix the legal aspect. There had to be a way to fix this...there just had to be.

Chapter 6

Riggs ran into Matthew Katzen as he walked in the woods of one of the most visited trails in these parts. He had decided to take this day to himself. He had become overstimulated with the number of people he dealt with about the project. This was one of the self-care things he did for himself, and he just convened with nature for a while as he prayed and meditated. Typically, he would return and feel like everything was right with his world for a while. While he usually saw people on the trail, it was just one of those things that he passed them with a nod, and that was that.

As he approached Matthew walking on the trail, he glanced around, expecting to see someone with him. There was no one. Matthew had Down Syndrome, and as Riggs didn't know much about such things, he thought that Matthew would need some supervision in daily functions, despite his best efforts. The guy even seemed to have a sweet girlfriend, Hazel, with the same diagnosis as his.

"Hi, Riggs," Matthew said with that big open smile of his. "How are you today?"

"I'm okay," Riggs said. "What are you doing out here today?"

He realized that the question to someone else might sound impudent. To Matthew, though, they answered questions with black-and-white answers. The guy just took everything at face value, and Riggs was grateful in this moment of unrest that it was Matthew he had come upon.

"I like being out in nature," Matthew replied. "Margaret came to help Brigitta today because of her bad brother. I thought I would come to clear my head," Matthew said clearly and with a determined tilt of his chin.

"Brigitta has a bad brother?" Riggs found himself asking before he could even filter the words.

"His name is Landon," Matthew said wide open. "He said she can't do a nice place like my home. He wants to take all

the land and says it is his too. He didn't sound very nice, so Margaret said she wanted to talk to her in person. My sister is super nice."

Riggs gave a light chuckle and bobbed his head. "Yes, your sister is super nice," he remarked, taking in all the information. "You are pretty fortunate to have someone that kind in your life, and Margaret seems like a great lady."

"She is the best," Matthew replied. "She doesn't ever treat me like I'm not smart. She says I have to earn my way just like anyone. I get to work on the ranch, and she even gave me Babe, my sheep, who is the best friend ever."

"You have a sheep as a best friend? That is super," Riggs replied with a smile. There was just something about talking to Matthew that made you happy. The guy had no guile or hidden intentions. Matthew was the most open person that Riggs had ever met, and it was joyous to be around him. "Margaret is pretty special, and I met Hazel, who also seems pretty cool."

"Hazel is the best. But did you know that people with Down Syndrome don't always meet people to date?" Matthew asked. "Noah and Margaret said that God made us all equal, and he wanted me to find love. Isn't that cool?"

"Very cool," Riggs said.

"You should have a sister like Margaret because you look sad. She could make things better for you," Matthew said without a single ounce of doubt showing on his face.

"I once had a brother," he said, shocked at revealing that he didn't normally share that history with others. "His name was Reece, and he was my best friend in the world."

"Did he die?" Matthew asked, obviously reading the facial expressions on Riggs' face.

"Yes," Riggs said as his voice broke. "He got really sick when he was a teenager. He had cancer, and he passed away when I was just getting into college," he sighed.

"I'm sorry, Riggs," Matthew said suddenly, stepping forward to hug him. Riggs was shocked at the emotions that flooded his system at the gesture.

“I miss him so much, and I can imagine, like Margaret, it would be amazing to have him around to talk to all the time. I did some therapy just to function again, but sometimes when I am out here, I feel like I can talk to my brother, and it makes things better,” Riggs said, feeling this calming need to share with Matthew in a way that he never had before since losing Reece.

His brother had been his best friend and the person he loved most. They did everything together as kids, and he often had gone home, even in the first years of college, to maintain that connection. Unfortunately, when he did get sick, the rate at which the disease took him was swift, horrid, and life-impacting. After that, Riggs’ parents wouldn’t talk about it for long. Riggs just bottled up a lot and only let it out in his solitude. Sharing with Matthew, though, was oddly cathartic.

“You still hurt,” Matthew said as a statement, not a question. “Margaret said that is what we do at Living River Ranch. We help lots of people that are hurt and need help. Sometimes their brains are bad and tell them things that aren’t right. But sometimes they are hurt and need Bella, Stormi, and others to make them better,” he said simply. “Margaret said that you and Brigitta will help even more people. Maybe you can help more people and make them less sad as we do. I can even bring Babe to visit. People like Babe.”

Riggs just stood there staring at the man and was shocked. He believed that sometimes you got messages or answers to prayers, but never had he gotten one this loudly. He had been torn about the involvement with this new project, as it was dredging so much up inside of him. He had been praying about this feeling that he was supposed to do more than just this site survey for Brigitta and this project. Yet, something special about this endeavor continued to keep him up at night, and he couldn’t shake it. Matthew had just told him something critical.

“Thank you, Matthew,” he said. “You are amazing.”

“I know,” Matthew grinned back at him as they both laughed. Suddenly an alarm sounded, and Matthew raised a

hand to look at the watch device on his wrist. "I have to go now."

"Do you mind if I walk with you?" Riggs asked.

"That would be fun," Matthew started down the trail without any hesitation.

They chatted and talked all the way back to town. Riggs found himself raising his eyes toward the heavens with thankful eyes. It had been a restful and happy morning despite the brevity of the walk. When they finally got to the diner in town, Riggs saw Margaret and Brigitta walking outside simultaneously. His eyes connected with Brigitta, who furrowed her brow in confusion at him.

"You hiked with Matthew?" she asked him.

"We ran into each other," Riggs answered. "Morning," he said, turning to Margaret.

"Morning, Riggs," she said. "Did you have fun with my favorite brother?"

"I'm your only brother," Matthew remarked.

"I know," Margaret teased with a loving grin in return.

"We had an amazing morning," he said, slapping Matthew slightly on the shoulder. "Didn't we?"

"We did," Matthew put his arm about him.

They all said goodbye, and Margaret and Matthew wandered off. He then turned to Brigitta.

"I heard your brother is giving you issues?"

"Yeah, I have some tough decisions to make," she said with a tightening around her lips.

"Well, I am all in. No matter what you need from me," Riggs said with a quiet nod. "Beyond the feasibility and site survey. I will help however you need."

She turned slowly to look at him, and there was a big moment he could feel pass between the two of them.

“Thank you,” she said, swiping at a tear. “You know you could be stuck with me the rest of your life, so you might be careful what you promise.”

He leaned over and gently kissed her cheek.

“I’m not scared,” he said, and for the first time in a long time, he felt total peace with this choice. Life had just pivoted heavily on him, but he wasn’t scared about that as he might have been just months before.

Chapter 7

Brigitta was sitting at the makeshift desk she had put in the temporary construction building on the ranch property. They had bought a trailer and made it into the main hub for the project as there were a ton of orders, administration, and hiring that needed to be done, and they continued to do that from the bed and breakfast room she was renting. This morning the task list she was working her way through was just beyond what she felt capable of handling.

The first person she met with this morning was going to be a critical part of the construction team. Brigitta needed someone that was able to embed in the project and become one of her right-hand partners as they moved forward. A knock right on time sounded at the door.

“Good morning,” Maragaret’s voice sounded. “You ready for this?” She asked as she stepped into the trailer, with a bright smile as she held out a coffee for Brigitta.

“You are amazing to make this trip again,” Brigitta replied. “I couldn’t do this without you, but I don’t want this to be a burden to anyone. Please let me know if there is something I’m asking that is too much.”

“Brigitta, this is my heart and purpose on earth to help others,” Margaret said calmly. “You need to accept all the help people can give, surround yourself like you are doing with positive people that invest in your mission, and never feel bad for using people’s natural talents. That is the advice my grandfather provided me when I was having doubts early on in our journey of change at Living River Ranch.”

Brigitta thought about that for a moment, “Good advice. Just remember that I will take you up on that advice, as you are one of the smartest, most driven, and most engaged people I know. I want to learn everything you can give, and I value your opinion as we put the initial people together on my team.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Margaret said. “The first interview is here,” she said, bobbing her head toward the door. “You ready?”

Brigitta realized how real everything was becoming at that moment. She was about to become responsible for the livelihood of many other people, taking on a mission that was important yet humbling in the same breath. She knew that she could do this with Margaret’s and other individuals’ support and steady, good decision-making. One tiny silent prayer toward heaven, and she was ready.

“Bring it on,” Brigitta said as Margaret flung the door wide. A moment later, a woman in jeans, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap stepped inside. “Lorelei,” Brigitta stood and moved forward with her hand outstretched.

“Yes, Lorelei Hardy,” she said, taking Brigitta’s hand and then Margaret’s in turn. “Thank you for having me in today. I love what I hear about this new project, and I am hopeful my company can partner.”

“You run a small rehab company, correct?” Brigitta said. “I read the email your father wrote, and the list of references you sent was expansive,” she told the lady.

It was rare to find a woman running a construction company, yet from all that Brigitta had learned in calling references, Lorelei was excellent at her role. She just didn’t know if the scope of her project would fit with the business that Lorelei normally did.

“I inherited it from my father,” Lorelei said as they all took seats and faced each other. “It’s been a lot of hard work for me to earn my place. There is not much local work, so I travel more than I would like. This project, being local to my home, is the best thing. Additionally, the mission you all undertake hits close to home.”

“How so?” Margaret bit out before Brigitta could voice the question.

“So, my mother left us about ten years ago,” Lorelei remarked. “My brother Nelson was born nonverbal and

autistic. She couldn't handle it after a while and just took off for a short vacation that became a permanent estrangement. That meant that when my father passed, I took over caring for Nelson, and that is a big part of my life now," Lorelei replied. "I would imagine this project is intended to help people like my brother, which is important to me. We have been fortunate to find therapy and support, but it is nearly a hundred miles from here. Getting him to his therapies these last few years has been a burden, but I wouldn't change anything. I realize that others might not be able to take on the time, money, or effort needed to get their loved ones to help. For that reason, while this would be a money venture for me if hired to help build and rehab out here...it is also a passion project."

"Is this the biggest project you will have done so far?" Margaret asked, voicing Brigitta's biggest question for Lorelei.

"Yes," she said, not hesitating even a second. "Obviously, there is not this kind of massive project that happens in this part of Michigan often," Lorelei replied. "That said, I know I'm not one of the big guys that would normally be retained for something like this. I also acknowledge that we would need to bring in other companies, workers, and the like to ensure that all of this could come to fruition in a timely manner. That said, I know I can manage this project in a timely fashion and be a right hand to you," she said, leveling Brigitta with a direct gaze. "I honestly can't tell you how much this would mean to me, investing here in my own community, being close to Nelson, and helping with something that would benefit so many people," she finished the statement that she gushed out all on one breath.

Brigitta glanced at Margaret, who seemed to be intently studying Lorelei. She remembered all the classes they had taken back in college. When interviewing people, there was a checklist of things you went through from experience, the scope of projects, and the best monetary impact from your hire. Lorelei didn't make sense on many levels, yet there was this overwhelming feeling that she was the right person. She noticed Margaret catch her eye and nod.

“What do you have on deck that you would need to finish before you could take this on?” Brigitta asked.

“I have a rehab in town that I do have a few guys on and a restaurant rehab that we are about seventy-five percent done,” Lorelei admitted. “I could punch in here and carve out time from the team pretty quickly. Full-time it would be about thirty days or so.”

“Understood,” Brigitta said. “I do have a couple of additional interviews, but I’m moving quickly and will have an answer in the next forty-eight hours.”

“That is fair,” Lorelei said.

They visited for a few more minutes before another knock interjected. Brigitta had lined up a huge number of appointments back-to-back and knew that despite wanting to engage further, keeping the train of people moving was critical. She walked Lorelei to the door and realized that these interviews were a little more emotional than a normal interaction for a job. That said, there was only one way to go...forward and as quick as possible. This was a big undertaking, and it would be a good long time before a break was possible.

With a firm squaring of her shoulders, Brigitta opened the door for the next person, determined to make the day as productive as possible.

Chapter 8

Riggs picked up the phone that had rung about six times in short order. He noticed it was a previous client for whom he had done a project about a year ago. He had not wanted to be interrupted as he finished up the site survey for Brigitta and sent the file off. That was the end of the first leg of his job for her project. He figured with the downtime today, he probably needed to give some time to other clients to ensure there was nothing open he needed to address.

“Hey, Clint,” he said into the receiver of the phone.

“Riggs, long time no see,” Clint chuckled. “I have a new development we will take on in San Antonio. I would love to know your availability to take on that work for me as soon as possible.”

“I would have to get some timeline estimates and services needed,” he said, taking notes as Clint spoke.

Clint was a repeat client that did housing developments in six different states. He paid well, was on time, and seemed to value the product that Riggs produced versus others he had worked with previously. It was the ideal situation for someone in his position that depended on contract work for his livelihood.

After garnering all the information, Riggs realized this project would take a bit longer than possible. It would be about a month away, though he could come home in between. It was also a hefty paycheck and the exact kind of work that he normally enjoyed. Something was holding him back from jumping on board, and he ended the call by telling Clint that he would take a look at his schedule and get back to him. When he hung up, he sat there staring at the phone, unsure of what to do next.

A knock at the door sounded at just that moment, causing him to jump as it wasn't expected. He trudged to the door, his brain spinning in a million different directions. When he glanced out the little window in the front of the house and

found Brigitta standing there, his heart slammed hard against his chest wall. He hadn't expected to see her this morning but was happy she was there.

"Good morning," he said. "You just can't stay away from me, can you?" he teased, trying to change the sour expression on her face.

"You know it's like a bad rash I simply can't get rid of," Brigitta remarked. "You have a few minutes," she said, nervously hopping from foot to foot.

"Sure," he remarked and slipped into his shoes that he kept at the front door. Then he stepped outside as Brigitta started to walk down the driveway nearly a quarter mile to the main road. "So, how did all the interviews go this week?"

"Good," she sighed. "It is a lot, and I have something that I want to talk to you about. I know this is not your normal thing, so please feel free to say no. I just couldn't shake this feeling that I had to ask you first before I went elsewhere," she said and continued walking, staring at the ground. He could feel the weird stress rolling off her. "I am on the verge of making a huge decision."

"Hey," Riggs reached out and stymied her progress with a hand on her shoulder, then flipped around in front of her and stared down into her upturned face. "Talk to me."

He didn't exactly know how to handle women, as it had been a lot of years since he had to do this. He wanted to help be a shoulder for Brigitta to lean on without making her feel overwhelmed. The emotions rolling off her, though, were startling, and he definitely was feeling out of his element.

"I think I have an offer that Landon will accept and finally step aside and leave this place. That said, it will mean that I've put all my eggs in this basket, and I need Loving River Ranch to get up and off the ground. It is where I will live and work going forward," she said.

"That all sounds good, right? I thought that was the end goal you were working toward," he replied. "So, why do you look like you are about to throw up over this decision?"

“You know I didn’t expect to have this hunger for this project eating me up,” Brigitta replied, holding her stomach. “I’ve stood up to my stepbrother and Bruce for the first time. That is how much this means to me. That said, I know I’m about to sink my entire trust and future into this, and it is a huge decision.”

“And you think I can help in what way?”

She turned to look him dead in the eyes. For the longest time, she seemed to examine his face and quietly contemplate something from the serious expression he witnessed. He didn’t want to rush her into anything, so he just stood there.

“Do you think that if we work together that it could ruin things?”

“Ruin things?” he asked, as his head bobbed back a bit as he didn’t understand that question. “I’m sorry, I don’t fully comprehend what you are talking about. You might have to spell things out simply for me.”

“I have these feelings for you,” she admitted. “I need to get everything on the table before making final decisions. I don’t need some big declaration of love or anything at this juncture. I do think you must have that piece of information, though, before I make this next request.”

Riggs just stared at her, realizing she admitted liking him like she was simply ordering something from a menu. He had to admire the fact that she was willing to make such emotional confessions. On the other hand, she was right that he was not in a position to go big in that area right now. This love of his was quickly garnering ground in his heart, but a slow burn would settle him more than just jumping into anything. He tried to compartmentalize all of that information and focus on the next statement she was working up to.

“So, I have this lady that runs a rehab company,” she stopped and squinted at him. “Do you know Lorelei?”

He was stunned as he hadn’t even thought about Lorelei getting involved in Loving River Ranch. That totally made

sense; the second Brigitta brought it up, he wished he had been more thoughtful in that regard.

“I do know her and her brother Nelson from church. She is a hard worker and a nice lady,” he said. “She took on her father’s business when he died and cared for her brother. That is a lot, yet she always seems so peaceful and like she has everything well in hand.”

“Good, because that was my impression, and I would like to retain her company for the lion’s share of the work on the existing buildings and other projects.”

“I think that is great,” he confirmed her choice. “What does this have to do with me?”

“I have had a lot of time to contemplate this project and discuss the breadth of tasks with Margaret. I am going to need someone that helps with this project to manage things. This person needs construction, vendor management, and about a billion other skills. I don’t know your going rate for this work, but I wanted to extend the offer for you to fill that role,” she said. “I think you and I would work much like Margaret and Noah, as we seem in synch in most areas. Additionally, I love that we can talk about nearly anything. I honestly haven’t interviewed or thought of anyone I would rather take on this project with,” she finished as Riggs felt the weight of this request settle on him.

Everything in his life would change. He would have a day-to-day requirement on his time once again. This was as much a passion project with emotions deeply embedded as it was a job. He would be working alongside Brigitta, with who he was fast falling in love. Definitely, a totally different offer than the one that Clint had just provided.

“Wow,” Riggs managed to elicit. “That is my second offer in less than an hour.”

“Oh, you already accepted another job,” Brigitta asked, as a small pout popped on her face.

“One of my clients that I’ve done a number of projects for called,” he admitted. “Oddly enough, I actually couldn’t give

him an answer right off for some reason,” he gave a light chuckle. “I told him I needed time to think it over, and then you knocked on the door.”

Brigitta turned and started walking the driveway again. It seemed as if she was giving him some time to wrestle with all the information and her request. He had this overwhelming urge to say yes, shocking him. She was offering such a big commitment, exactly what he had been running from for years. Not only would he be working alongside her, but his mind went to Nelson and Matthew. Those would be some of the client bases that Loving River Ranch would undertake, which was another emotional layer to the job that couldn't be quantified.

“You know, I've been pretty happy just earning a living and making my way through life,” he remarked. “I kept thinking I was happy and had the life I wanted until you arrived in town. I think you were meant to show me just how wrong I was.”

“I didn't intend to do that,” Brigitta remarked. “I had no idea how much this idea would take root in my psyche and not let me go either. I will say that I was prepared for a lot of work when I headed here, but you were definitely a surprise to me also. I hadn't really thought about finding someone in the middle of nowhere that could make me stop in my tracks.”

“You are just sweet telling me now,” Riggs remarked, reaching out to take her hand in his own. “I'm in,” he found the words fumbling from his mouth. “I think we can come up with a reasonable rate of pay that keeps me at a living wage but doesn't need to be what I currently make. This is important, and I would love to be a part of this journey.”

“Are you sure?” Brigitta asked, turning to him with tear-filled eyes.

“I'm positive,” he said as he leaned in to kiss the corner of her mouth, “I couldn't imagine the regret I would live with if I didn't throw myself into his and do everything in my power to see this endeavor off the ground.”

“Thank you,” Brigitta said with a deep sigh. “Now, I need to go make a deal with the devil.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Landon. I have been praying about this for a while, and it is the last roadblock to breaking ground and moving forward,” she said with a slight shake of her head.

He didn’t know what she was up against, but he would be praying that it all worked out as his entire life now hung in the balance of the outcome of Landon and her meeting. He wanted Brigitta here and had to believe that her passion could win her stepbrother over and clear the path toward Loving River Ranch’s future.

Chapter 9

Brigitta walked into the building where her attorney's office was and felt her heart in her throat the entire way. After weeks of soul searching, a site survey with Riggs, time with Margaret taking in all working aspects of Living River Ranch, and a lot of prayers...she had made a life choice about what the next few chapters of her life would look like. The life she had before her mother passed was not the future she saw for herself.

It had not been a quick decision, but now it was made, leaving her only to negotiate this last aspect of the deal. Her attorney had let her know the chances of them winning outright in court were pretty low, so she was determined to win Landon and Bruce over to her side with another negotiating tactic.

As she walked into the office, Brigitta was immediately shown into a conference room, where Landon, Bruce, and their attorney sat. Her lawyer rose with a respectful nod of the head before she found a seat opposite her step-family members.

"Brigitta," Landon said with a smirk, but her gaze fell to Bruce instead.

She had thoughtfully considered what she was to say today. Reminding herself to stay calm, not let emotion take hold, and speak honestly were the things that continued to rumble around her mind. She didn't want to burn bridges here but rather reach an amicable end to the standoff between both sides. These two had been the only family she and her mother had for years, and that didn't change with a small disagreement like this. She would not be held to her promise to her mother if she stirred up bad blood here today.

"I want to start by saying that I appreciate all you did for my mother. She adored you and the life you built for her until the end," I said as he gave a slight nod. "I don't want to turn this meeting ugly, but I think we can agree that, for some reason, things between us never gelled. That had nothing to do

with you and more me,” I sighed with a shrug of my shoulder. “No ugly memories, but with the realization of the property mother left behind, I had a major shift in mindset. I have met with people and had some feasibility done on this major project I wish to undertake,” I said.

“Sorry, I just don’t think that will work,” Landon replied, but Brigitta noticed that Bruce had reached out to his son.

“Let her finish, and then we can have a turn,” he said kindly, nodding at Brigitta to finish.

“I appreciate it. I did consult with legal about mother’s will, and I understand that my mother did adore Landon and tried to make her will fair for both of us, as she considered herself the mother of two children,” Brigitta noticed Landon even seemed moved by that, and the cocky look on his face faded a bit.

“She was always so nice,” Landon replied. “I did love her; I hope you know that.”

“I do,” she agreed, knowing that, in his own way, Landon had adored her mother. His worldview might be slightly askew from hers, but that didn’t allow her the ability to judge him. “In that vein, I have a deal that I’m willing to broker for complete ownership of the property in Michigan,” she replied as she nodded to the attorney that sent the envelope across the table.

Landon and Bruce both looked at each other and then at the envelope. Neither of them reached out for a moment, and instead, Bruce bowed his head. She could tell something was off with this meeting suddenly but honestly didn’t know what it was. No one seemed to move, as if they were waiting for someone to take the first move and run with it.

“I had thought you would back down,” Bruce said softly. “I promised your mother that I would take care of you and thus forced Landon to force the issue of the property. We knew it would be a gamble if you went to court. I didn’t think pursuing a nonprofit on that property in the middle of Michigan was the best use of our money, time, and education. I believed, to be honest, that it was even dangerous for a single

woman like yourself to try to live in such a place. You have always resided in a nice house in cities with so many amenities around you,” Bruce sighed. “I honestly thought I was doing the right thing.”

Brigitta just sat back, stunned at the admission and not certain what she was to do with that information. She honestly loved this man and expected that he wanted the best for her, and there was nothing hurtful or angry in his expression as he took all the blame upon himself. Landon even looked a bit flustered.

“She was willing to offer you her home free and clear in exchange for the property,” Brigitta’s attorney spoke up.

“Your house?” Bruce asked. “You believe in this project that much? I honestly didn’t have any idea.”

“Margaret was a friend of mine in college, and she sparked something even back then. I could make more money and rise to new positions in the coming years, but that would simply benefit me,” I sighed. “I want to do something that will matter and give mom a legacy on the land that everyone in her family has held onto for generations. Even when they weren’t working that land, something stopped everyone from divesting us of it,” Brigitta sighed. “I have to give this a try. I’m not being reckless, and I have amazing people around me that will support the effort.”

She turned to Landon. “You keep the house. Rent it out, sell it, or whatever you like. Use the money or invest it. I want to be sure that no matter how this turns out, I made you right in the deal.”

“I appreciate that,” he said. “We have a deal. Do you have the paperwork to sign over the land?”

“In the folder,” she said, glancing back at the document still lying between them. “I will be sure you both get an invitation when the ranch opens for the first clients. I would love to see you both there,” she said.

“We’ll be there,” Bruce confirmed. “Your mom would be so proud and probably scold me for standing in your way. She

always did think you were meant for bigger things, so I'm sure she is watching down thinking about how she told me so."

"I bet she is," Brigitta said as Landon signed the contract and sent it back across the table. "Thanks," she said to him as she stood and walked out with one backward glance, ready for this next exciting chapter of her life.

Chapter 10

Brigitta was finishing up with the architecture firm phone call, and she had made a bevy of notes on her tablet. She started to type them into a more readable format on the computer when the phone rang again. She had been answering a constant ringing of the device all morning. It was now only three weeks since they broke ground here for the new facilities, and it had gone from zero to crazy overnight. The number of staff seemed to double daily, and keeping everything straight was nearly a full-time gig for her. She had already decided her next hire might have to be a personal secretary to handle calls and manage her schedule. The sheer volume of vendors, grants, and small details were getting crazy.

“Morning,” Riggs said as he stomped into the space, and she glanced up at the clock.

“You know it is just ten minutes to noon, right?” she teased him as he walked over to lightly kiss her lips.

“I do, but I had to go get that load of supplies requested, and the trailer we were using was not coded for the amount of weight we put on it,” he said. “There was a tiny little mishap that took longer than expected.”

“You do know that you don’t have to do that manual labor,” she smiled at his dusty clothes. “We do have another out-of-town crew that will be joining us shortly. Also, we have loads of supplies coming in that should hopefully help us get that aspect more in hand. I know the local general store is struggling with the influx,” she muttered, realizing she was rambling without any clear direction.

“Everyone in town is willing to help in any way needed,” Riggs replied, shocked at how truly invested everyone was. “We got the trailer all redone, even a little welding right there on the side of the road. It is all good. I love the fact that every day out here is never like the one before. I don’t mind doing any of the work as it all needs to get done,” he smiled down at her. “I have a feeling that you also do a host of tasks that you

don't have to do as the CEO and president of Loving River Ranch LLC.”

“Right, but until we staff up, I do what needs doing. Also, I really think that title sounds pretentious and hope that I never have to apply it to cards or anything,” she wrinkled her nose in disdain.

“I guess that is up to the boss,” Riggs teased her with a huge grin. “Oh wait, that would be you.”

They had officially been out on their first date two days previous, and it went great. While their relationship didn't seem to be following any predetermined plan, it was perfect so far. The future was looking challenging and purpose-driven. What could possibly go wrong?

“I did talk to Lorelei, and she was worried about this new guy that you hired,” he said in a soft tone. “Did you not have her meet that crew lead before bringing him in? I thought you were going to do that?”

“I was,” Brigitta sighed. “I tried to arrange the meeting via video conference and such. Between the crazy schedules, Lorelie finishing up her old duties before transferring to work out here full-time, and the like, it was hard to find an opening. Besides, Braylon came highly recommended by several of the military vets associated with Living River Ranch. He served with Ezra, Jake, and others I've met. They are all wonderful guys, and I believe he will fit right in.”

“When is he due here?” Riggs asked, noticing Brigitta glanced at her calendar a second before her skin got super blotchy.

“I believe lunch today,” she sighed, looking at the clock above the door that Riggs had just walked through. “Man,” she slapped her head, “I'm losing it. For some reason, I was certain it was tomorrow. I guess we had better go find Lorelie and have a quick chat.”

“Definitely,” Riggs said as he waited for her to rise and go ahead of him. “You know that personal assistant might be a

great idea. Even with both of us, project managing this operation is a lot.”

“I know; Noah even quipped that I might need to bring a cot to the office when we were on conference with Margaret earlier,” Brigitta remarked. “I knew the hours were going to be long; I think when you first start with anything, it is super hard to know the full extent of help that it might require.”

“You just need to keep finding the gaps and filling them as effectively as possible. We don’t want to hire just to hire, but I think we need at least one assistant to help the two of us,” he sighed.

“I’m on it,” she pivoted to put a note on the pad next to her laptop before turning to exit the trailer.

She noticed a small group of men standing around something in the yard. There was cheering and some odd things being said that didn’t make a lick of sense. With Riggs right next to her, Brigitta saw Lorelei with a fifty-pound bag of concrete on her shoulder, looking as if she was about to start a relay race. Right next to her was a man that she didn’t recognize.

“Hello,” Brigitta said, breaking through the crowd to glance at Lorelei. “What is going on?”

“Braylon here, your new hire, took one look at me and declared women couldn’t do construction jobs,” Lorelei said, popping a hip out as she tried to balance the bag of concrete.

“She is just petite,” Braylon said toward Riggs and Brigitta. “She has decided to try and show me up and see who can haul this bag further.”

“Well, I see the two of you have met at least,” Brigitta said, shaking her head. “Good luck. If you don’t take this one, you know you won’t live it down,” she whispered to Braylon as she made eye contact with Lorelei and then stepped back out of the way.

“Now, let’s see who is the tougher one,” Lorelei said as the crowd erupted all around, and Brigitta looked at Riggs.

“You think that is a good idea?” he asked, looking perplexed at her reaction.

She could only shrug and turn to watch the battle of wills about to start.

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