

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a red and white checkered shirt and a wide-brimmed straw hat, is shown from the side. She is holding a small, fluffy brown dog. She is standing next to a large hay bale. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting. The title 'LOVE for a Cowboy' is overlaid on the top half of the image. 'LOVE' is in a brown, sans-serif font. 'for a' is in a smaller, brown, sans-serif font. 'Cowboy' is in a large, black, cursive font with decorative flourishes. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with the text 'SILVER MOUNTAIN' around a central floral design.

LOVE
for a
Cowboy

DEB GOODMAN

Love for a Cowboy

A SECOND CHANCE SILVER PLUM ROMANCE

DEB GOODMAN

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Epilogue

Chapter One

Ruby Garza let The Clucky Spud's glass door close behind her. Good riddance to

the couples' love fest going on in there, emphasis on *couples*.

Her vision might have been cloudy from the healthy dose of greasy air she'd just gotten from the restaurant, or maybe her head was down because of the self-imposed shame she'd felt from her lack of coupleship, but either way, she smacked into a brick wall just outside the restaurant. An *oof* came from her lungs, and she stumbled back, peeling the crushed to-go container off the front of her.

"I'm sorry," the man said.

Okay, so it wasn't a brick wall at all. But he *was* a tall glass of water. Ruggedly trimmed light brown hair. Flannel shirt and jeans. The street lamp might have been messing with her vision, but if she wasn't mistaken, those green eyes of his were sweet, blessed pools of desire.

He was a delectable combo meal of the country singer Walker Hayes and every childhood crush she'd ever had.

"It's...fine," she mumbled, pushing past him. She tossed a "Sorry" over her shoulder and kept walking, glancing down at her leftovers, hoping they were salvageable.

"Now, wait." He spun around and stepped up beside her. "You sure you're all right?" His voice might have sounded sincere if her embarrassment was allowing her to hear clearly.

If all right means I'm a third wheel most of the time these days, then sure. I'm all right, she thought.

She put a hand up to her burning cheek. Was it burning because she'd bumped it in the collision? Or because she was embarrassed about not looking both ways before she'd charged onto the sidewalk on Main Street?

To be fair, Main Street in Silver Plum, Idaho, didn't get much foot traffic late at night.

She stopped. "I'm good, thank you. I apologize for not looking where I was going."

He shuffled his feet, those green pools gazing at her. "I'm Weston Wade. I just moved in and was looking to grab a bite to eat."

Weston Wade. Somehow, somewhere in the deep caverns of her mind, that name was familiar. And the more she looked at him, the more he himself seemed familiar. But she was coming up empty. "The Clucky Spud is closed. The owners are just waiting for my friends to finish eating," she said.

And finish drooling over their significant others.

"Do you know of another place I could go?" His head whipped around in both directions.

"That's really the only place to eat around here. And the grocery store's been closed for the night for a while." She frowned. The man was out of luck.

"Oh, okay."

When he said he just moved in, did that mean he'd moved in that very day and literally didn't have anything to eat? That would not do. The next day was Sunday, and nothing was open.

In her job as a social worker, she dealt with people who were hungry. She couldn't *not* do something. And she wasn't about to invite this stranger, regardless of those eyes, to her place for a meal.

She pushed her leftover container out in front of her. "It's a little crushed now due to the whole smacking-into-you thing,

but it's probably still edible." She tipped it to one side and peered in the gap between the lid and the base. "You're welcome to have it if you want it. It's chicken strips that I haven't touched or eaten from."

He looked down at the box and then back up at her, his mouth turning up at the corners. "That's kind of you, but I don't want to take your food. I'll be okay. I'm sure there's something in storage at the ranch that I could eat."

The ranch.

That's when it hit her, why his name had seemed familiar to her. A wash of righteous clarity hit her gut. Weston Wade. Grandson of Earl Wade. The only person in town she heartily disliked.

And the only person in town clinging selfishly to the one thing she wanted.

Chapter Two

“**E**arl Wade, huh?” The woman with the long, shiny sheets of dark hair with a touch of blonde almost sneered his grandfather’s name.

He was only trying to get some food. He hadn’t meant to run into the soft, beautiful woman who was now scowling at him.

Before the scowling, she’d seemed to be a nice intro to Silver Plum.

“You know him?” Weston asked, but he already knew the answer. It was Silver Plum. Of course she knew him, and not just because the town was so small. Earl Wade was the most important man in the county.

“Sort of.” The woman’s face became a mask of indifference—but to Weston, it seemed to be a wall of defense.

That was interesting. Why would mention of his grandfather make her go all ramrod straight? “Well, I’m here now and hoping to start getting to know people,” he said. “It’s always helpful to have a neighbor or two to ask to borrow sugar from.”

“We’re not neighbors, but I’m sure your actual neighbors would be happy to share with you.” The angle of her brows gave away her unease.

“Well, is everyone in Silver Plum generous? You offered me your food within seconds of meeting me.”

Her mouth twisted to the side, and she glanced down at the broken Styrofoam container. “I would say the majority of us

are, yes.” The brief smile didn’t quite meet her gaze, which only flitted to him for a moment before she turned her head to look down the street.

Was she uncomfortable? Was she looking for her car as a means of escape?

He took a step back. “Well, I won’t take up any more of your time.” For some reason, an odd, sort of half salute thing escaped him. Irritation at his own nerdiness flooded him. “Sorry for smacking right into you. You have a good night—” He let the word hang in the air, hoping she would fill in her name.

She seemed to consider him as she did the twisting thing again with her mouth. It was a pretty mouth. Everything about her was pretty.

“It’s Ruby.” She raked a hand through her hair and glanced again at what Weston could only assume was her car.

“Ruby.” He realized he was doing a head bob thing. What was that all about? Had his abilities with the ladies been snatched from him the moment he crossed over into Silver Plum’s borders?

She stuck the Styrofoam box to his chest, bouncing it against him once for emphasis. “I insist.” Her expression verged on frustration.

“Yes, ma’am.” He glanced down at the box and nodded again, this time with purpose instead of sheer nerves. “Thank you.”

She opened her mouth as if to say something but then clamped it shut and turned to leave without so much as a smile.

The morning sun filtered through the windows above the kitchen sink of Wade Ranch. The smell of pancakes and bacon wafted in the air, compliments of Weston’s aunt Lana.

“What did you do?” Weston asked, leery of the reddened cheeks of his Grandpa Wade. He looked as guilty as a skunk.

“I didn’t *do* anything, Wes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The light wood paneling on the kitchen walls still held a buffed sheen, as if his grandma had just tended to it a week ago. How had Gramps kept it looking this nice? With a swift pain to the gut, Weston remembered Grandma had been gone for ten years now.

Back in its heyday, Wade Ranch had sometimes functioned as a hotel of sorts for the stars. Silver Plum didn’t have a hotel, and the Bed and Breakfast was a little too cramped and vintagy—or some might say, just plain old. So, for the higher-profile guests that came in from time to time, Wade Ranch had filled that need. A sprawling one-story, cream brick masterpiece on a large parcel of land, the ranch house was on a cliff overlooking farmland and the town proper. It was quiet and less than a mile from the mouth of the canyon.

It was glorious. At least, it had been once. Even though some parts of the ranch had been well-maintained, it no longer had much of an audience. Grandma’s passing had precipitated a slowing down of everything at the ranch. Gramps started lowering his cattle count by at least fifty every year. And as staff members reached retirement, he didn’t hire any replacements. Everything was stuck in a ten-year Jello-stagnant sludge. And Weston was here to revive it.

Earl took another bite of his pancakes and bacon from the box of food aunt Lana had sent this morning. Weston hadn’t dished himself up yet, but the way the pat of butter was sliding off the hot stack was wearing him down. Besides, he was hungry—it’d been hours since he’d eaten those chicken strips.

She’d said her name was Ruby. And that was one of Weston’s first topics of the day. Who is this Ruby person and why did she seem off when Weston had mentioned the ranch? Now Gramps was avoiding the conversation, and that was not a good sign.

Earl finally swallowed. “You’ve gotten heated over nothing.” He swallowed some coffee and then turned his head

to look out the window. "I'm just glad she stopped showing up at my door."

"Whatever this Ruby person did, it must have been bad." Weston slid three pancakes on his plate. "You need all the visitors you can get in your old age."

A grunt of a laugh came from Earl. "I don't appreciate you fishing for information like that." But his smile was rueful as he looked down at his food, slicing another bite away from the stack. "What's on the schedule for today? I was thinking we could clear out the stalls before the demolition company comes next week."

"And by 'we' you mean 'me.'"

"You're smarter than you let on, boy." Again with the annoying, Cheshire Cat grins.

Weston sat down across from Gramps and grabbed the butter dish. "Have you thought any more about keeping the stalls, though? All that side needs is a refresh. At first glance yesterday, it looked like some of the stalls hadn't even been mucked in the last ten years. Still stale." The thought was incomprehensible to Weston. Grandpa used to run the brightest, shiniest operation this side of the Rockies. Everyone knew that.

"Hadn't gotten around to mucking stalls I don't need anymore." He brought his hands up in surrender, his fork poised in between two fingers. "Sorry for livin'. It's not that bad."

Weston smiled and leaned back in his chair. "I'm not insulting you. Don't get your panties in a bunch."

"There will be no talk of ladies' undergarments in this kitchen, Wes."

Weston had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. Gramps thought he was so clever. But Weston wouldn't be deterred from finding out what Gramps had done to make the beautiful Ruby so upset.

"You're avoiding my question. What's the deal with Ruby?"

Gramps didn't miss a beat. "Your aunt gave us some muffins, those apple cider ones. I bet the cider was made with their apple press, even." Earl paused and eyed his dwindling pancakes.

He was stalling, but Weston allowed the redirection to bring up another sore point. "Thanks to Lana, we won't be starving today. Were you aware that the kitchen was completely empty?"

Gramps shrugged. "I've been staying at Lana's most of the time these days. You know Lyle can't do jack squat around the house. I've been reinforcing and repairing all the drawers there."

His stomach shifted. No, he hadn't been aware that Gramps had basically moved in with his daughter. Weston never thought he'd see the day his grandfather would voluntarily spend any real amount of time away from his childhood home.

"Gramps." Weston hadn't taken a bite of his pancakes yet, his fork still resting in his hand. "Ruby?"

"Hey, now." Gramps chewed and swallowed. "You're asking an old man to remember? You're treading into dangerous waters now. How am I supposed to remember everything?"

Oh, brother. "You might be old, but you're the furthest from senile I've ever seen. Why did Ruby look like I'd mentioned a bank robber or a tax evader when I said your name? I know what I saw."

Earl took one last swallow before wiping his mouth with an embroidered napkin. Weston didn't need to see the tiny "LW" monogrammed into the corner to know it was made by his grandma maybe fifty years before. This particular one had belt buckles embroidered all over it, a classic Louise Wade design.

"Sometimes people in town get to scheming." A couple of beads of sweat appeared on Gramps's forehead. "Thinking up ways they can capitalize on the ranch. They know I'm slowing

down, and they see dollar signs and start dreaming up ways to make my golden years miserable. Ruby Garza is one of those people, and she didn't take kindly to me refusing her offer."

Garza. Now Weston had a last name.

That would have been a good thing, except for the possibility that she might try to influence Weston himself if she couldn't get to his grandpa. Not that she seemed to want to have much to do with him the night before.

Weston finally took a bite and let the maple syrup-soaked pancake melt in his mouth. From a mix or not, these things were perfection. "Does this concern have to do with that event planner from before?"

Earl snorted at the memory. "Just because we hosted a wedding here once back in the eighties does not mean I'm interested in doing it ever again. I couldn't get those tire gouges out of the front lawn for a long while." He shook his head. "Nope. Ruby had nothing to do with the event planner from Boise, trying to convince me that this place would make a 'dreamy destination wedding venue.'" Gramps made air quotes. "Geesh, all that talk about fresh canyon air and the quaintness of the mooing cows." His giggle turned into a louder guffaw. "First of all, lady, people aren't going to want to come all the way up here to get married at my ranch. Second of all, they aren't pretty little milking cows. They're Black Angus, and this isn't Jersey, England with your picturesque scenery and black and white Holsteins." Gramps had to wipe his eyes. "This is a real ranch."

Except it wasn't anymore. Had Gramps forgotten? The ranch was basically a ghost town. But Weston was here now, and he was going to get it fully operational again. His whole life, well since he'd been fifteen years old, had prepared him for this.

"It will be, Gramps. And that wedding planner obviously hadn't come around in the fall because the second she smelled the east winds blowing in the lovely aroma of manure, she would have high-tailed it out of here."

That was enough to get Gramps going again, and he had to wait awhile before he could take a bite of bacon. “Yes, she would have,” Gramps said as his laughter slowed. “That’s not a bad idea, Wes. We could set up a filtration system that pumps cow and heifer air around the vicinity. That’ll keep them away.”

“So, what was it that Ruby Garza wanted exactly?” Weston sat back and away from the table. The pancakes weren’t sitting quite right in his system.

“Oh, something about a program for kids,” Earl said. “She wanted to bring a bunch of teens up here and teach them the value of hard work. Put them in the bunkhouse and everything.”

Weston sighed. “Sounds like a lawsuit waiting to happen. What makes her think there would be room anyway? That bunkhouse will be full of ranch hands as soon as the staffing service gets things squared away.”

If Weston thought Gramps looked guilty before, it was nothing compared to now. Earl Wade stood from the table, still holding the napkin. He glanced down at it and took a big breath.

“Listen, Wes. Maybe we should hold off on bringing all those hands on for the summer? Make sure that’s what we really want to do.”

“We’ll have the first hundred head arriving in a few weeks. The first wave of guys should be here a day or two before that, so we can transport them up to the highlands. Things are happening. We’re getting this place up and going again. It will be like it was when Grandma was alive.”

Gramp’s mouth held firm. “I never agreed to that, Wes.”

Someone must have pulled a plug on Weston’s face because he felt the blood draining right out of it. “You asked me to come here to help with the ranch. If you want me to make some more repairs and preparations to make sure we’re really ready, I understand.”

“That’s not—“ Gramps stopped short and shook his head. “I don’t know if I have it in me.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Weston said. “I got this, Gramps. This will secure your retirement. A few more years, and you’ll be just fine retiring.”

“I don’t know.” Gramps’s voice was firm, but a shadow crossed over his eyes. “We don’t need the money. I’ve got plenty to retire on.”

Weston’s head began to throb. “I’m not sure what to say to this.” His voice had stayed even, he hoped. But his insides were rioting. He’d left everything to come do what he’d always been meant to do: revive and restore the Wade family’s ancestral ranch.

“I feel good about retiring.” Gramps’s face began to lose some color, too. “It’s a good time to do it, financially speaking. And for lots of other reasons, too.”

“I thought you wanted to demo a few outbuildings. Trim things up. Make things more efficient, that’s all. I didn’t know you wanted to close up shop and quit.” Weston could barely say the words. They dried out his mouth like he’d chewed on a piece of straw.

“Let’s talk about the specifics later.” Gramps pointed to Weston’s plate. “You haven’t eaten much. Lana told me to make sure you ate the food she sent.”

Now the breakfast was like stones in Weston’s middle. His grandpa, his hero, hadn’t called him up to carry on the family legacy. He’d called him up to help him shut it down.

Chapter Three

Ruby squirmed in her seat in the back office of the Women's and Children's Center in Rexburg. *Does it look like I have to use the restroom?* she wondered, praying she didn't.

Hey, at least she wasn't thinking, *Is it obvious I have to pee?*

See? She could be professional, classy even, in her thought patterns. Where there was a will, there was a way. And if anything required her to be professional and classy, it was this meeting today.

Her bulging bladder wasn't the only reason she was squirming. Magda Torres Sharp, her boss and mentor, sat across from her. When describing Ms. Sharp to others, Ruby usually used words like "genius" and "lifesaver." To say Ruby was a little in awe of her was like saying she'd been in awe of her mom's favorite Chicano rock band, Los Lonely Boys, when she was a kid. Vast understatement.

Sidenote: she wouldn't turn down any of the bandmates if they came into town and asked her out, even though they were way older than her.

But that was neither here nor there because Magda Torres Sharp was saying something about the grants the Department of Family and Social Services had dealt with in the past.

Focus, Ruby.

"Enough about some of the precedents that have been set for these kinds of things," Magda said, pressing a thin hand to

her perfectly in place low side bun. “I think the grant and matching donation is not lacking in any way. The problem is that we still don’t have a location nailed down, Ruby.”

“Ms. Sharp—”

“Magda. You’re welcome to call me Magda,” she said with an encouraging smile. During the mentorship, and ever since, Ruby had always thought of the legendary forty-something as Magda Torres Sharp. Magda Torres Sharp this and Magda Torres Sharp that.

Could she even dare to just start calling her Magda now? This was big! This was really big. Did Ms. Sharp see her more as a ... a colleague now and less like an underling fresh out of her Master’s program like she’d been four years before?

“M ... Magda,” Ruby stumbled. “Thanks.” She placed her hands on her cheeks. “Gosh, that almost feels like the president of the United States asking me to call him Joe, you know?” She felt her cheeks grow hot beneath her fingers. When would she learn to close her big, amateur mouth and stop fangirling so relentlessly?

What if Magda Torres Sharp thought she was just an apple polisher? Ruby inhaled sharply and tried to focus on her senses. Maybe if she could ground herself a little, she wouldn’t be so nervous.

Anjali, a member of their friend group, Kids Night Out, or KNO for short, and YouTube-famous yogi extraordinaire, would be happy to see Ruby using her grounding skills.

Magda only offered a brief laugh, her eyes kind.

“I’ve been in various contract stages with two separate locations,” Ruby said. “And it’s true that both have fallen through.” Ruby swallowed down the pit of ineptness that threatened. She needed to get back to grounding, which meant she had to identify things using her five senses.

Blue mug! The scent of peppermint! The boring, gray clock on the wall!

“However, there’s another possibility. I’ve been speaking with Earl Wade. I’m sure you’ve heard of him. He’s

considering my proposal to host the program at his ranch. As you may know, the ranch has not been in full operation for several years, but it's still very well kept and a prime location since it's off the grid but not hours away from civilization. In short, it's great. The vibe there is perfect for the girls. I get a good feeling about it every time I'm there—”

“The vibe is secondary.” Magda shook her head. “We just need beds. Eight of them, to be exact. And we need enough resources to make this more than a glorified work release program, or worse, a wilderness program.”

Magda shuddered, and Ruby's corresponding shudder was almost a reflex. The county had had bad luck with wilderness programs in the past, which was reason number 814 why Ruby's program for at-risk girls, Rise Up, had to succeed.

“Bad memories, yes.” Ruby sat taller in her seat. “And I brought up the vibe because of those, um, less than perfect attempts in the past.”

Magda's eyes were sympathetic, but Ruby could tell there was a hammer about to be laid down. “We are fighting against that bad luck, bad management, however you want to frame it. The final approval from the foundation does hinge on you being able to prove that this program will be different from past programs.”

You. Magda's use of the word “you” brought Ruby back to the reality that she was alone in this, essentially. It was her baby. Her idea. Her neck on the line. As much as the department was rooting for her and offering her ideas and support, she was the one who was doing the work.

She was the one who had so much to lose.

It had always been that way, really. Her older sisters and younger brothers had, each in their own ways, beaten the odds for a better life than their parents had started out with. Delilah and Bella, the two oldest, had both gone into the medical field, with Delilah being a physician's assistant and Bella working in hospital administration. Joey and Raphael had gone a different, but equally noble, route: education for Joey, and business management for Rapha.

All of this was impressive considering the point in the kids' lives, when Rapha had been an infant, that they'd lived in a van.

Yes, a van down by an actual river.

Ruby rarely told the story of her roots to people, not that part anyway. Most people knew that the Garza family had had a rough go for the first twelve or so years of their beginning. But after two stints in rehab, Jonny Garza came clean and made a new life for his wife, Belinda and five little kids.

Ruby had few memories from before they came to live in Silver Plum. But she did remember the van. The newborn, ear-splitting cries from Rapha that echoed off the walls in the back.

She forced herself back to the present moment, rubbing her hands along her gray slacks. They were her best pair, but she hadn't been able to get the dry-erase marker out yet, which had been courtesy of one of the preschoolers at the Center the week before. She'd told herself all morning that no one would notice, especially since she'd worn her favorite top with it, a vibrant magenta with petal sleeves.

So what if she was in this alone? That wasn't any different from before. She could make it work, right?

"Any ideas on how to show them it'll be different?" she asked Magda.

"I've considered a trial run. Adding in that it would be for this summer only, initially. It would be a way to prove to the foundation that this could work. I mean, you have the financial backing. Remember when I told you a couple of years ago that was the first step?"

How could Ruby forget? She had practically breathed grant language instead of Silver Plum's pristine air for well over a year.

"The nearly finalized proposal was the second." Magda lifted the heavy folder containing what was essentially a representation of Ruby's every non-working moment for the last six months since the funding had been promised. "Non-

working” because this project of Ruby’s was off the clock, something she herself had wanted, created, and designed on her own.

A tinge of pride shot through Ruby as she glanced at the folder. That sucker was heavy because she’d thought of everything. All the “whys” and “hows” and “whats” of this program. The only loose end was the “where.”

“Location has to be nailed down, I know,” Ruby said.

“These last two pieces are problematic. The ‘where’ and the ‘why.’”

“The ‘why’? The ‘why’ is in here. Throughout every page.” Ruby thumped the tome. Suddenly she was back in junior high, trying to convince her teacher she belonged in student government even though she’d gotten a couple of Cs the term before. That was the last time she’d gotten a C on anything.

“Yes. And I can see that. But maybe that’s because I know you? The foundation’s board doesn’t, though.”

A sound of protest escaped Ruby, but she said nothing. Magda was the expert on this.

Magda continued, “I think a tighter summary would be helpful. More about your own why and how this applies to the kids you’re targeting. We know the Rise Up program is necessary; our data from family planning shows that. And I’m not asking you to pour your heart out on the page.” Magda grimaced. “The board doesn’t want that. I guess we need a stronger correlation between you and the program. What makes *you* capable of pulling *this* off?”

“So, I need to explain what makes me so special?” Cue the throat butterflies.

Magda’s glance was apologetic. “Well, yes. We need to kind of peddle your capabilities here. And I think you can do that.” She patted Ruby’s shoulder. “I know that’s not your usual way. You want to make this about the kids, and I don’t blame you.” She glanced down at the folder again. “But there needs to be more about yourself in these words, Ruby.”

Ruby swallowed hard and gave a short nod. The throat butterflies died down a little. She could do that. She had to do that.

“And location.” Magda leaned forward, both forearms on the desk. “None of this can happen without a location, which, to be frank, shouldn’t have been this hard. I’m surprised there isn’t a facility willing to house this. Especially out there in Silver Plum. You have to nail this down.”

Magda’s slight condescending tone about Silver Plum didn’t go unnoticed by Ruby, but that was something she could handle. She was used to people discrediting her town.

It was the feeling of failure that Ruby wasn’t sure she could handle. Location wasn’t typically this hard. Why hadn’t she been able to crack Earl Wade?

She’d gotten a corporate sponsorship fairly early on in the process, earning praise from everyone in the department, even Magda. And then the backing and matching from a business corp in California that former actress and Silver Plum’s most famous and influential resident, Victoria Bailey, had helped connect her with. Being so successful with what was typically the hardest part had given Ruby the push of belief she’d needed.

But without a location, there was no way to make this work. Her dream would be donezo. Flittered away on the breeze.

A memory of Earl Wade’s refusals gave way to thoughts of his grandson, Weston Wade. She’d given him her chicken, for heaven’s sake. He’d oozed masculinity, a politeness tethered by a sense of strength. His attractiveness had shot through her unwillingly.

Especially after she learned he was Earl’s grandson and that he’d moved into the ranch that she needed.

Magda rose, shaking Ruby out of her trance. She extended her hand. “I received a communication from the board yesterday. About the deadline.”

“Deadline?”

“If you can’t present the final proposal to them within thirty days from now, everything lapses. The funding, everything. You’d have to start the process all over again.”

Ruby had known this, theoretically. A hazy grouping of dates on various calendars and in the plethora of emails sent back and forth supported the fact that there was a deadline. But she’d had some sense of time blindness, thanks to her usually well-managed ADHD. She hadn’t wanted to consider that she wouldn’t be able to secure a location, so she sort of didn’t.

“So, I can’t finalize anything until the location has been signed on?” Ruby asked.

“Yes.” Magda nodded, her mouth firm. “But you can do this.”

“Within thirty days,” Ruby repeated.

Magda had already reached for her laptop bag. She turned back around. “Well, twenty-nine, technically. They sent the email yesterday.”

Chapter Four

Weston didn't want to admit the real reason he wanted to drive back into town Monday morning. The stated reason for the drive? His aunt Lana's box of food was only going to last so long, so he needed to pick up some groceries after his appointment with the local commodities broker.

But the grocery store, Food 'N' Friends, wasn't a draw, and neither was the appointment with the broker.

He remembered Silver Plum from his growing up years and the years since, and things looked pretty much the same: the rowhouse-style buildings were bright, charming, and cute. His little sisters used to fuss over them. There was an odd assortment of businesses: a bagel shop, health clinic, corner hiking store, and the always weird credit union/post office/newsroom/copy center. And of course, The Clucky Spud.

He slowed as he passed the businesses. Huh. The yoga studio was new, and a surprise for a town the size of Silver Plum.

Another surprise? Ruby Garza. The possibility, however slight, of running into her again was the real reason he didn't mind the drive in. His heart picked up its pace as he remembered their one encounter, when he almost got up the nerve to ask for her number or if he could arrange to see her again. But then he had to mention his grandfather's name. What was that look on her face? Obvious discomfort, but it was mixed with a loathing he'd found disturbing. How could

someone feel that way towards Earl Wade, the man, the myth, the legend?

Somebody who was trying to use the ranch for their own personal gain, that's who.

A shot of purpose lodged in his chest. Gramps would see the dedication. He'd understand the depths of Weston's loyalty and what Weston could do for the place.

Irritation caused him to scratch at the back of his head. He and Gramps had not talked about it since yesterday morning. They'd worked together on things, but it'd been quiet, a little more stiff than they usually were. Neither of them had brought up the future of the ranch again.

Weston parked near the end of the rowhouse buildings. He scanned the sidewalk just to make sure Ruby Garza wasn't around. He was disappointed she wasn't, which bothered him. She wanted to use the ranch, and that wasn't going to happen, so he shouldn't want to see her again.

But that didn't mean he didn't think about those dark eyes of hers now and again.

As he pulled open the door of the commodities broker, another wave of surprise hit him. The luxurious office was unlike any other commodities office he'd ever seen. Someone had taken the time to make it nice, high end and fancy even. Before he let the door close behind him, he backtracked out of the building and glanced over the wording on the glass door, just to be sure. *Kiefer Trading Group, Tory Hall Olson. Liam D. Olson and Associates. Attorney at Law* was in neat, gold lettering.

Okay, so he was in the right place.

A smiling woman with wavy hair stood from a desk. "Come on in. Yes, you're in the right place. But let me tell you, every time that happens, it makes me feel good."

She introduced herself as Tory Olson and gestured for him to have a seat in an expensive-looking leather sofa. She took a seat in the matching one across from him.

“So, I’m not the first one to mistake your office for a lush hotel lobby?”

Tory laughed. “I don’t know exactly what people think when they walk in, but about once a week, I’ll get someone new who has the most confused look on their face. I guess it’s not common for a commodities firm to have a water feature?”

“Or essential oils.” He pointed to a diffuser on the desk near them.

Tory grabbed a small iPad and got ready to take notes. “Let me know if the oils get too strong. I’m a little addicted to them.” She cleared her throat. “When dealing with new clients, I like to chat a bit upfront about your ranch, get to know you a little.”

“Actually, I was told we’ve been clients with you for a long time,” Weston said. “My grandfather is Earl Wade.”

Tory’s mouth dropped open. The name of Earl Wade had affected people the same way when he used to visit as a teen. Maybe it was usually equal parts intimidated and impressed. It was a good thing to be Earl’s grandson.

“Well, this is a nice surprise,” Tory said. “I mean, I noticed your last name, but I didn’t put two and two together. Are you going to be working his ranch?” She quickly typed on the screen. “Let me pull up his file. I don’t think he’s placed an order with us since I’ve been here.”

“We’re exploring the idea of reviving things.” Oh, how he wished it was a done deal, and he could start expanding right away. But apparently, that wasn’t Gramps’s intent. At least he hadn’t been opposed to the idea of Weston ordering a few things. With time, Gramps would come around. “I think we’ll start out kind of slow ... it hasn’t been much of a working ranch for a long time.”

“That’s probably a good idea. It could be overwhelming to jump back in too quickly.”

She had no idea how much it was overwhelming Gramps. Weston had enough excitement for the both of them, though, so it was all good.

“We’ll ease him into it,” Weston said. “I appreciate your help. This ranch is a big deal to the whole family, and I don’t want to squander the opportunity.”

Tory sized him up. “Are you from the area?”

“No. I’ve been ranching in Wyoming for a while. But I visited Silver Plum quite a bit growing up. It’s nice here.” He and his younger siblings joined their grandparents in community fairs in the summer and Christmas tree hunting in the snow after they came for Winter Break.

“It has its perks,” Tory said.” But the small size can be a drawback for some.”

“Not me. I’ve been living in Wyoming, where there are more antelope than people. I’m used to the small-town life.”

“I think you’ll fit in very well here then.” She sized him up again, and this time it was with more interest. Not in a romantic way, just in an ‘I’m going to keep an eye on you’ way.

They got into the nitty-gritty of the supplies and cattle he’d need. A hundred head to start with, and then hopefully more as soon as Gramps saw Weston’s vision.

Weston’s thoughts turned to the row of oaks along the west line of the property, planted forever ago by his great grandparents. The scent of pine and lily of the valley was still in his nose, even though he hadn’t even made it out to the southern edge of the property yet since he’d moved in. That was where his dad had spent an entire summer planting small evergreens along the back, dirt road. He knew from his last visit the year before that the pines towered over him, their boughs even starting to scratch and grow against each other as if they were all part of the same living organism.

Tory had just gone to her desk to run the ranch credit card when a movement at the glass door caught his attention.

A woman with strong, lean legs and dark hair blowing up and around her face tried to steady a large box in front of her while opening the front door. It wasn’t an easy task, and the

wind closed the door before she could get her foot wedged in it in time.

Ruby Garza. In a black, short dress that whipped up a bit, like her hair. The smooth, tan skin of her arms and legs glowed in the sun. Her eyes were like black flint but somehow soft. The curve of her chin to her neck ... the widow's peak and clear, supple forehead.

Something inside of him tilted. It was as if his stomach had grown and flattened throughout his whole body—his nerves seared like fire throughout him to his toes and fingertips.

No one—nothing—had ever given him that full-body sensation. Or full soul sensation.

Which was a problem. Something in his mind perked up to the danger in that. Of course, this woman couldn't interest him in this way.

Interest? He was a full-blown camel in a desert, and she was a mirage of shimmering water.

She was a spring of water to his bowl of dust. This couldn't be good, but he didn't muster up the care or concern to stop himself. He was a God-fearing man, and sometimes you just had to step into the unknown and have faith, right?

He strode to the door, taking her in during the last moments before she would see him. She growled in frustration and huffed out a breath, the muscles in her arms flexing as she struggled to hold on to the box.

"I got it, Ma'am," Weston said as he neared the door.

"I'm fine." Ruby's voice was muffled by the box, but the burst of frustration was unmistakable.

"I'm sure you're fine." He thought again of her lithe limbs. He was more than sure she was *fine*. "But it never hurt anybody to accept a little help once in a while."

He reached the doorway as she slid through it, the glass door hitting hard against the frame behind her. Her face flashed with recognition and then closed off and narrowed. Not as happy to see him as he was to see her, apparently.

“Ruby? It’s nice to see you again.” He reached to take the box. She’d probably insist on carrying it all by herself, but he figured he’d try anyway.

“Um ... hi ... Weston, was it?”

Her arms dropped almost imperceptibly, and he took the box easily, no fight about it whatsoever. It was heavy, and he realized he was scowling due to the weight of it.

Tory rushed to them. “You’ve already met each other. That’s great. I was just telling Weston about the social scene in town.”

“Social scene?” Ruby laughed. “I’d love to hear what you told him about because I didn’t think there was one.”

“That’s not true!” Tory said, and then her head whipped around to Weston. “That’s not true,” she repeated, her hand up. “We have a really fun time going out to dinner once a month in our group of friends. Plus, there’s ...” She trailed off. “Other stuff that I can’t think of right now.” She chuckled and then looked at Ruby. “Come on, Ruby. Tell him. Silver Plum’s not too shabby, right?”

She arched an eyebrow as she glanced at Tory. “I guess you can count the canyon, maybe? Driving up there, finding a picnic spot or a place to have a campfire and roast s’mores.”

“Sounds perfect,” Weston said. He was standing so near to her that he could feel the warmth from her body, which was at odds with the scowl on her face.

What was her deal?

“Weston’s just moved in. His grandpa is Earl Wade, in case you didn’t know,” Tory explained. There was something behind her words that Weston couldn’t quite name, something of a bite or a question.

“I heard.” Ruby nodded her head rapidly and clamped her mouth into a tight line.

Tory’s gaze went from Ruby to Weston. She might as well have said “Awkward” in a sing-songy voice. That was certainly the vibe, and Weston didn’t like it at all.

Weston looked down at the box he was holding. If things were awkward right now, the least he could do was see what it was that was so heavy. “Looks like some creepy dolls and a few books.” He craned his neck to better see inside. “*Get out of My Life, but First, Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* That’s literally the title of this book.”

He couldn’t stop the roll of laughter that burst through him. “What is this stuff?”

Ruby attempted to take the box from him, but he stepped back and addressed Tory. “Where would you like me to put this?”

“Just over on that counter will be fine.” She pointed to a high counter with a thick slab of granite on top.

He carried it over to the counter. “If either of you needs me to ask your mom about a ride to the mall, I’m happy to help.”

Ruby’s stare of death shut him right up. “The creepy dolls are actually very popular *Zombie Academy* dolls. Tory was nice enough to let me borrow them from her sisters’s old collection. And the book? That ancient manuscript was found in a donation box that Tory’s mom was going to get rid of. I snagged it to have in my office. Several very grateful parents borrowed it because it actually has pretty sound advice for parenting teen girls.”

Well, now he felt kind of dumb for making fun of it.

“Ruby’s always looking for things for the kids to play with and the parents to read while they spend time at the center,” Tory added. As the silence between them stretched on, Tory began talking again. “So, anyway. I think Weston should join us at KNO sometime. We could always use a couple more people, you know? It might help you get to know other people here in town.”

“KNO?” Weston asked. He wondered if this was like GNO, something his younger sisters called their nights out.

“It’s just a silly name we’ve given our group of friends,” Ruby glanced meaningfully at Tory. “It doesn’t even really

apply anymore since we're not kids now, and some of us even have kids of our own."

"Do you have kids?" Weston asked, pointing to Ruby after he'd placed the box on the floor. The thought of her being someone's mother was endearing, yet some primal part of him reared up, ready to fight whoever her baby daddy was.

What was going on with him?

Ruby's face froze, and again, something hidden flashed in her eyes.

Weston started in again. "Not that there's anything wrong with that ... I was just wondering if you meant you when you were talking about kids."

Why, Weston? Why can you never stop acting like a dunce when you're around Ruby Garza?

"No, no no no." Ruby's laugh grated like steel wool. "I do not have kids."

"But she works with kids at the Women and Children's Center," Tory said. She was smoothing out things between Weston and Ruby, back and forth like a tennis official. Why did he get the feeling she was trying to sell him something? Cattle and other supplies, yes. But why was she trying to sell him the idea of Ruby?

"Wow. That must be really rewarding—" He trailed off as Ruby stepped past him and over to the box.

"Anyway, Tory, I brought back this stuff. Please tell your sisters thanks," Ruby's gaze was locked on Tory's, like she was purposefully avoiding him.

"They're way too old for this stuff now, but I guess it has sentimental value." Tory turned back to Weston. "We'd love to have you join us for our next night out. There are a few married or engaged people, but I promise we're still fun to be with."

"Debatable." Ruby's back was turned away from them as she shuffled through the contents of the box.

Tory laughed, and she lightly shoved Ruby.

“I’m up for it if everyone else is okay with me joining.” The rat-a-tat-tat of his heart must have been what was compelling him to agree. Ruby was certainly special, and the thought of getting to see her again was too hard to resist. But he wanted to give her an out if she didn’t feel the same way. Which was becoming more and more obvious. She probably really wasn’t digging him the way he was digging her. “But you must be a pretty tight-knit group, and I wouldn’t want to impose. The ranch is going to keep me busy, so no hard feelings if you decide to just keep it status quo.”

Tory clicked her tongue, her gaze going between Ruby and Weston. “The status quo is boring sometimes. We would love to have you come, and it keeps expanding anyway. It’s always the first Saturday of the month.” She sat back down at her desk, the chair swiveling back and forth like she was an evil mastermind, and Ruby and Weston were her minions. “Besides, if nothing else, you can get a meal at the Clucky Spud.” She placed a hand over her heart, and her head tipped back as she sighed. “Best food around, no question.”

“I’ve already had the pleasure of enjoying some Clucky Spud food, thanks to Ruby here.”

Tory’s brows rose, and her grin spread. “Wow. That’s terrific.”

Ruby’s face reddened, and she seemed to weigh her words. “Thanks again, Tory. Weston, welcome to Silver Plum.” But she licked her lips so quickly, it was as if her words were poison on her tongue.

“Thanks for the food the other night. I would have starved without it.” Weston put his hand up to his hat and bobbed his head.

“No problem. Good luck with the ranch. Your grandfather is certainly set in his ways, so I hope it all works out.” Her dark eyes flashed, and she spun so quickly her hair fanned out. The smell of apples—her shampoo maybe—wafted through the air as she left the building.

For the second time in three days, Ruby Garza had him totally stumped, hog-tied, and whipped.

Chapter Five

Weston's drive home after the commodities office and the grocery store was a blur. Thank goodness he knew the way well. Miles and miles of farmland—potato, alfalfa, and barley crops, mostly—stretched out on either side, so it was easy to get lost in thoughts, especially when he went a mile or two without seeing another living soul.

Ruby. Her name suited her because she glowed like a gem. There were two things that had solidified in his head in the few minutes he'd just spent with her. One, he was falling hard for a woman he barely knew. And this woman could barely stand the sight of him.

Which should have bothered him more than it did. It would bother him more once he got off the high of seeing her again.

There was something so familiar about her, like he'd seen her before, like he'd really known her before. He'd never felt this strongly for her or anyone, of that he was sure. How come he felt like he already knew her? Maybe he'd seen her around town when he came to visit while growing up. But on those visits, he and his family had stayed at the ranch pretty much the whole time. They rarely went into town because of the long drive and the sheer amount of work to be done.

Work. This whole project was going to be more work than he'd anticipated. His head burned with frustration again as he thought of Gramps deciding it was time to close up shop. How could they close up shop on something that was an entity in and of itself?

The ranch seemed to exist beyond the walls of the buildings, beyond the livestock and workers and family. It was a living, breathing thing of its own, powerful and beating. No one could kill that, even if they tried.

You can't try to kill it, Gramps.

Why couldn't Gramps just let him have a stab at a revival?

He did know he'd have to take it slow. He'd need to confirm the hundred head with him, for sure. But he'd have to be careful when talking about the future, at least for a little while.

Gramps just wasn't seeing things clearly. He was tired, worn out, and missing Grandma. He didn't understand the ramifications of letting go of Wade Ranch for good.

Weston's thoughts flip-flopped from the ranch, back to Ruby, and back to the ranch for the rest of the drive back. Fields gave way to sagebrush and boulders, scraggly wild gooseberry bushes scattered in between. Finally, before the mouth of the canyon lay the ranch. Sprawling, dignified, with more character than even some people he knew.

He slowed at the entrance to the long, straight lane and turned left to drive under a stone arch made by Weston's great grandfather, Mitchell.

Rolling down the lane, Weston's pickup truck bounced along the bumpy, dirt surface and then stopped in front of the main house. He needed to make some lunch using the groceries he had just purchased.

Like he'd figured, Earl Wade was resting in his recliner in the den, the stepdown area just off the kitchen. With his cowboy hat off, Weston could see that Gramps's hair was thinner than ever, and instead of his signature silver, the strands had become a downy white.

"Feel like some roast beef, Gramps?"

"If you've got some of that mustard I like, then sure." Gramps was watching the news on T.V.

Weston pulled a small jar of the grainy, brown mustard he personally couldn't stand out of a paper sack with "Food 'N' Friends" stamped on the front. "Don't ever doubt my ability to pull off a good meal." He offered a good-natured smile.

He made the sandwiches with some thick slices of brown bread the little bakery corner of the store had on display and settled in the recliner opposite Gramps. The recliners had been there ever since Grandma died. Before that, Gramps didn't take much time to sit still and rest.

"So, what's the story?" Gramps asked between bites of the sandwich.

"First, tell me how the food is."

"Decent. Could use a little more of that brown mustard." His tongue darted out to catch a bit of bread on his outer lip. "But I guess I'll still keep you around."

Weston rolled his eyes. "Back to your original question: the story is, I went over to the commodities brokerage firm."

"And?" Gramps's eyes were still trained on the afternoon news report on the T.V.

"Just a hundred head." Weston held on, nervous about how Gramps might react. "Should be delivered in two weeks, which gives us plenty of time to hire a hand or two."

Gramps set his sandwich down on the avocado and off-white colored lunch plate. "To what end?"

Weston's skin prickled. *Please let Gramps see where my heart is on this, God.* "There's still an alfalfa field that's in pretty good shape. I just thought instead of letting it go to waste this year, we could get some cattle. Cut it and bale it for them. I hear you about slowing things down. I just want to make sure you're really ready before we end things completely."

"Wes." His breath came out slowly, almost labored. "I thought about selling that alfalfa to Seth Watson down the road." Gramps motioned in the air with his arm. "Ranching's hard work, in case you haven't noticed. I've done it all my life. It's all I've ever known. I'd like to hang it up while I still have

some life left in me to go visit the family. Maybe see some rodeos in the Midwest. Maybe even go to the beach.”

“You? In a swimming suit?”

Gramps cracked a smile. “I said nothing about swimming in the ocean, just sitting on the beach. I have a nice pair of beach jeans that will work just fine.”

“Beach jeans? They probably look just like the ones you’re wearing.”

Gramps’s face split in two with his grin. “All my jeans look the same. So what?” He sighed again. “I appreciate what you’re doing. I appreciate you coming out here this summer and helping me. I don’t need you to try to save the ranch. It doesn’t need saving; it needs to be let go gently. It needs to be allowed to die with some dignity.”

Was he talking about the ranch or himself? Gramps was only in his early seventies and still had a lot of life left in him. He was still healthy and strong.

They were silent for a long while, the only sounds coming from the news reporters. Gramps didn’t even keep eating.

“I’m the only one.” Weston eased onto the sofa. He wasn’t sure how to articulate this, but he had to try.

“The only one what?”

“You know how your sons left. They both chose business. They left the ranching life at eighteen and never looked back. Aunt Lana, she stayed nearby, yes. She went to Bartlett and married a spud farmer, and she’s been there for you. But neither of your sons, nor your daughter, nor your other grandkids have wanted this. They don’t see what I see. Sure, we all love the ranch. We all love to visit. But, Gramps. They have a life beyond here. They’ll be fine with letting it go.”

“And you won’t be?” Gramps’s voice was rattly and soft.

Weston let out a long breath. “I don’t want to be. Your dad built this place with his own two hands, and you and your siblings helped. And your mom? Wasn’t she a midwife here in

Silver Plum? She was a rancher's wife, and she birthed most of the babies here for what? Thirty plus years?"

"My mama worked as a midwife for almost forty years, Wes."

"See? There's too much here. We can't just give it up."

"Just because I want to close a door on one way of life doesn't mean all those great things didn't happen. You think shutting the ranch down erases all the good that's come out of this place? You think your grandmother's memory is just wiped clean away if we close the doors and sell?"

The earth gave way beneath Weston. "Sell? Now you're talking about selling?"

"We've been talking about selling for years, Wes! Where have you been?" Gramps grew red, and Weston wondered if the glass plate was going to be safe in his hands for much longer. He looked like he might chuck it.

"Where have I been? I've been learning how to ranch! I've been doing this work, day in and day out. Instead of dating and traveling and settling down somewhere, I've been learning and getting the experience necessary. For you!"

Gramps got out of the recliner, the half of a sandwich barely hanging on for dear life. "Now, don't you be making this about me. If this were about me, you'd be happy to help me fulfill my wishes. You'd be happy to help me go out on a high note. No, Wes. You're only thinking of yourself."

"I've never thought of myself in this whole thing." Weston's palms grew wet, and he had to force his breathing to stay even. "At age eighteen, I could have gone to college anywhere, but I chose University of Wyoming, where they have the best programs for ranching and livestock business. I put myself through school. For this." He opened his arms wide. "For Wade Ranch. I figured if no one else wanted to continue the legacy, I would. And you don't even care."

"I do care." Gramps's voice was quieter than before. "But you chose that, son. I didn't ask you to."

“But you told me how you felt when I came here to live at fifteen. Remember? You were upset about how your sons didn’t want to stay on and take over and that your ranch hands had become the sons of the ranch.”

Gramps put the plate down on the counter, and some of the air stuck in Weston’s lungs released. He was pretty sure those were Grandma’s plates. “I was angry when your dad and uncle chose different careers than ranching. I can admit it. It hurt for a long time, mostly just because I love my boys and wanted them here with me. I wanted you to hear my side of things. I’d never been quite sure how much your dad had told you about his decision to leave, and I don’t know ...” Gramps shrugged and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I did want someone in the family to come back and help.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing now. I’m ready for this.”

Gramps shook his head and started to pace. The old wooden floors of the kitchen were already worn down; it looked like Gramps just might finish them off. “When you first came here as a teen, you had one foot out the door for the first couple of weeks, don’t you remember? I was trying to tell you that it was meaningful you were here. But you wanted nothing to do with the ranch or us.”

“Maybe. But things changed real fast.”

“You were a teenager. Mad at your parents for looking at you funny. For pity’s sake, Wes. You were having a rough time, and your grandma and I were trying to help.”

“I know. And you did help me. This is where I decided my career. My dad and uncle? It took leaving the ranch for them to find what they wanted to do. But me?” Weston folded his arms across his chest. “It took coming here for me to know my purpose.”

“I’m glad. I’m proud of you. Seeing you rope and learning how to handle the livestock and all that? Priceless.” He swallowe hard. “But that wasn’t the point of bringing you out here, son. We brought you here to help you see that you didn’t need to be bound up by your stupid, harebrained mistakes!”

A sliver of agony cut through Weston. His mistakes. Yeah, he'd made a bunch. Some of them were big ones. But he'd changed. He'd righted those wrongs. There was no sense in digging up that brief but colorful past.

"Yeah, they were stupid mistakes." Weston placed his hands on his hips and shifted his weight. "Bad mistakes. I'm different now."

"Of course you are. Anyone with a set of eyes can see that. You've done well for yourself." Even though Gramps's tone had calmed down, his eyes were still on high alert, like he was waiting for a bomb to go off.

"I thought you wanted to pass all this along to me because no one else seemed to want it. So I learned. I worked my butt off here to learn how. And I kept working back in Wyoming." Weston needed something to do. He couldn't just stare at Gramps while he was laying everything out on the line. He started putting the condiments back in the fridge. "I've told you in the past that I would like to come and take over. I thought that's what you meant when you asked me to come."

"I never said that we'd be ramping up to get to full capacity again. I asked you if you'd like to come and help with the ranch. I told you I was demoing. You've known for years that someday I would retire."

Weston put the mayo back in the fridge and closed the door. In a not-so-soft way. "I didn't know you wanted to demo the whole thing! I didn't know you were gonna Dr. Kevorkian the whole place."

"I'm not! I'm sorry I wasn't clearer with my words, Weston." Gramps's face looked like someone who'd just found out his home team lost the World Series. "I told you I'd pay you more than what you're making at your old job to come do some clean-up and demo. Every Christmas, when you've come to the ranch, we've talked about selling, moving on, wrapping it up. What did you think I meant?"

When Weston only stared, Earl dropped his head to his chest. His voice became subdued, and the raspiness returned.

“I know the ranch is important to you. And I’m happy that it is. I’m glad you love it as much as me.”

“What are you so afraid of? That I’ll mess it up? That I’ll run it into the ground?” The knowledge that maybe Gramps didn’t trust him with it tasted like charcoal on his tongue, burnt and caustic.

“No. It’s not that,” Gramps replied. “I can’t have this weight on my shoulders anymore. This place is a ghost town. And everything here reminds me of your grandmother. And I’m on the short end of the stick, as far as lifespan goes. And I’m glad to be.” A low sound rumbled from his chest. “You don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand what I’m trying to say, either.”

“I want to, Wes. And I want you to continue ranching. Just not here. I mean, if you’ve already ordered the hundred head, I guess that’s fine for now. But long term, I want to tear everything down, except the house and maybe one of the barns, and I don’t know ...” He shrugged. “Sell it as parcels. Smaller lots. The thought of having someone else ranch out here? It scares me and breaks my heart, and I’d just rather recycle it ... turn it into something new.”

“Someone else? I’m not ‘someone else.’ I don’t know what to say.” Weston stared at the harsh lines in Gramps’ forehead. “It looks like you’ve made up your mind. I always thought you’d retire, and I’d carry things on.” Weston’s throat was thick, his neck beaded with sweat. “Why would you rather sell than have me take over?”

“It’s too hard to explain. I’m very sorry. And it’s not you. I’d feel this way no matter what. I’m grateful you’ve come, but if you want to go back to Wyoming, I’ll understand and have no hard feelings. I’m sure I can get some of my old hands to come back and help clean this place up and wrap up all the loose ends.”

The loose ends. And here Weston had thought he was being given a fresh ball of string, a new life full of possibilities. He felt the pull of his jaw growing tight as he

struggled to avoid unleashing a mess of words he didn't even know how to begin to form. "I need some air."

The euphoria of earlier, of feeling the zing of connection with Ruby, was nothing more than bitter dregs under his tongue as he trudged out the back door and through the too-long grass of the little yard in front of the corral.

If there was no more Wade Ranch, what would he possibly do with his life?

Chapter Six

If Kenny Chesney and a Mid-century Modern design aesthetic had a baby, it would be named Wade Ranch.

Ruby straightened her jumper and stood taller before ringing the doorbell, her gaze going over the thick, carved front door stained in a glowing honey tone. The doorbell chimed a happy jig, and Ruby smiled despite the earlier rejections she'd received here at the ranch from Earl Wade. A "thanks but no thanks" from Earl in person months before. Then his responses each time she tried again were basically the same. Two email responses, a month apart, swift and to the point. One by snail mail, a little nicer, but still a firm no.

This was it. Her last viable option.

She grunted at the thought. Viable? If winning a greased pig contest at the county fair was viable for her, this was even less so.

She'd worried about what to wear. Usually, she didn't have the luxury of taking that time to worry about how she looked. Her commute to and from work was long, the hours at the women's and children's center were longer, and the patrons didn't seem to care much whether she was in joggers and T-shirts or something newer than her old college sweatshirts. If she showed up in her bathrobe, they'd probably still treat her the same way. They were nice like that, just thankful to be getting the help they needed.

But today she chose something fancier. The jumper was a nice, professional cut, not too short, but hit just at the right place above the knee. It was jade green and paired with nude

high-heeled sandals, giving off a professional yet unstuffy vibe. At least she hoped it did.

What did one wear to talk to someone who owned a ranch you wanted to lease and who'd already turned you down several times? Maybe she should have worn her rodeo attire. Too late now. Her belt buckle was probably back at her parents' house in some drawer anyway.

As she waited, she looked out over the front of the Wade property. Large brush oak grew on either side of the lane, cut off halfway up with some marshland, complete with cattails bending in the wind.

It really was a beautiful, peaceful place—one that she'd felt a connection to for months.

When no one answered, she rang the doorbell again, and this time, her nerves crept up her like fast-growing vines. She hoped Earl was here—that was who she needed to talk to. But what if Weston opened the door?

Her nerves clung to her limbs, dead weight and curled. Weston Wade had been arrogant at Tory's office the day before. That first time she met him, he'd reminded her of something or someone she'd known before. Nothing in particular, just an echo of something good. It scratched below the surface of her consciousness, until she'd given it up the day before. He must just have one of those faces.

Granted, it was a handsome face with a square jaw that stuck to her memory like the first time she ate coconut pineapple fluff ice cream. Dreamy, other worldly, and too good to be true.

She figured sending up a prayer or two that Earl and not Weston would answer the door couldn't hurt anything.

But when the door swung open to reveal the tall, muscular Weston, his hair wet and his body smelling of spicy aftershave and soap, it hit her again. That she'd known him before. *Gee thanks, heavens above.*

“Well, hello, Ms. Garza.” His smile was polite, formal even. But there was a warmth there that drew her to him. The

taste of pineapple coconut fluff ice cream came to mind again.

“Hi, Mr. Wade.” For some odd reason, she dragged out the “a” sound in Wade. She had NOT meant to make her reply flirtatious, but it had probably come out that way. Dang it. She’d meant to match his formality, and that was all. Instead, she’d sounded like a nearly drunk woman out on the town at the local bar.

He only smiled slightly at her, his gaze boring into hers.

“Is your grandfather at home?”

“He went into town. Said something about needing to talk to Marlene? I have no idea who that is,” Weston said.

She shifted her weight. “Oh, he probably means Marlene Roundy. She runs the post office, but she also puts together the newspaper.” She hesitated. “Newspaper is probably a strong word. It’s more like a flier, a neighborly report kind of thing, with an obituary thrown in for good measure.”

A smile crossed his lip. “Sounds like our newspapers back home,” Weston said. “And I think my grandpa has a stack of them in the den. I’ll have to read through them, get to know everybody in town.”

“Oh, that’s as good a way as any.” Ruby smiled. “You can always pull it up online, though, if you want. We went digital a whole three years ago.”

No use in alienating Weston or in antagonizing him further. She needed him to be on her side, and she could sweet-talk anyone if she really had to. She learned that skill early on in her career in social work. And it wasn’t sweet-talking, necessarily. She preferred to call it “practicing diplomacy.”

“Can I come in and wait for him? It’s important that I speak to him.” The nerves tingled up inside her again. ‘Really important’ was an understatement. If he didn’t agree to this, the whole project would have to be scrapped. And she didn’t know if she had it in her to start all over again.

Weston turned his head to glance behind him. “Uh, sure. Come on in.” His mouth closed firmly in a line, and there was something about the shape of his brow that reminded her again

of someone she knew. But who? She would have to get out her yearbook later and see if he looked like anyone she went to high school with.

They walked along a narrow corridor that ran parallel to the main entrance. On the wall were black and white prints of several kids sitting on what looked to be the same horse.

“These are cute,” Ruby said.

“Can you guess which one is me?” Weston’s gaze was sweet, and he did a slight shoulder bump against hers. Since he was a few inches taller than her, he had to bend down a little to do it.

She peered into the faces of the kids. There were ten in all, eight by ten-inch prints on canvas.

“Something about the eyes tells me this one is you, but really, they all look alike. Do you have nine siblings?”

Weston chuckled. “No. These three are my siblings, two girls and one boy, all younger than me. And then those two down there are my aunt’s twins. And then the other three up there are my uncle’s kids. And you’re right, that is me. How did you guess?”

“I just picked out the one that looked to be the most trouble, and it was easy from there.”

Weston sputtered a laugh, but Ruby continued walking along the hall until it opened up into a small sitting room. There were Ansel Adams photos on these walls, as well as Native American-style woven throw pillows and a floor lamp with geometric shapes carved into the side. The floors, walls, and ceiling were covered in the same, warm honey paneling.

“Have a seat. We can wait for him right here. I’m not sure how long he’ll be. Sometimes he wanders around town, talking to his friends.” His frown was apologetic. “And there’s that bagel shop that he loves, too. It might take a while.”

“The Schmear Campaign? Yeah, I’ve seen him there before. It’s okay. I have all day. I got work off to come here.”

“Oh no. Did you make an appointment with him that he forgot about?”

“No. I ... I wasn't sure if I should warn him that I was coming. I meant to just pop in unannounced.” She cringed. “It's rude, I know. It's just that I was hoping to make one last attempt to ... sort of change his mind.”

“Does this have to do with a program for kids or something?”

“Yes. Did he mention it?” Her heart pounded. Please let that mean that he's changed his mind and would love to have Rise Up be housed here.

“Only that he wasn't interested. I'm sorry, but I think you should know that I'm here to try to get the ranch going again. If that's what he decides. I don't think this would be the best location for kids to be in. We'll be under construction, and there's a lot to get done. And we'll need the bunkhouse for our workers, so—”

“There are two bunkhouses here, though,” she cut in. “And when I first pitched the idea to him months ago, he told me we could use the one nearest the house.” She stood and walked to the window that looked over the east side. She saw the foothills that signaled the entrance to the canyon less than a mile away. “That one there. He said it's in better shape anyway. We only need eight bunks to start, so ...” She trailed off.

“He gave you permission to use one of the bunkhouses? Why would he do that when he said you can't have the program here?”

“Well, this was before he gave me a definitive no.” She sighed. “He seemed interested at first, and though he never signed anything, he was open to my ideas and seemed like he wanted to help. But then one day, when I came back to have him sign some forms my department head needed, he told me I couldn't use the ranch.”

“I'm sorry, but it sounds like his mind is made up. The liabilities alone are a big enough deterrent.” He gazed at her

thoughtfully. “But this is Idaho. You Idahoans have almost as much space as Wyoming does. I’m sure there are other options.”

“There aren’t,” she said flatly. “And I’m on a tight deadline to secure a location. Believe me. I wouldn’t have come here if I’d had any other choice.” She raised her chin. “Looks like everyone around here says they’re willing to help at-risk teens until they’re actually asked. Then everyone twiddles their thumbs and hems and haws because they worry about ‘liabilities.’” She spun around and headed for the corridor. “Can you just please give him my card? I’ve given him one before, but I’m sure he ... lost it.”

She fumbled in her bag for one. Well, there was one, but it had a small stain on the corner of it. Huh. That was probably from the peanut butter cup wrapper she’d thrown in there the other day. Ugh, it would have to do. She tried to wipe it off before she handed it to him, but she could tell he still saw some grime on there.

He took the card, and she pushed past him, her heels clicking on the shiny wooden floors. *Please don’t slip, please don’t slip*, she pleaded silently.

“Wait. Ruby? I—I think we’re both wanting this ranch, and like it or not, he’s holding on to it with both fists.”

She stopped and turned around. “He doesn’t want you to run it?”

Weston hesitated. “Not in the way I want it to be. I’ve had visions of restoring this place to a working ranch in full operation, even exceeding its capacity from before, since I was eighteen years old. Problem is, he doesn’t have the same vision.”

“So, he doesn’t want to grow the ranching business here, and he doesn’t want to host a program to help kids.” She nodded, grinding her teeth together until her crowns ached. “And instead of being willing to vouch for me, you’re trying to convince him that growing the ranch is the better option?”

“It’s not like that. Sure, I’d love for him to allow me to go wild around here and turn this into the largest ranch in the state. But as of right now, that’s not going to happen. He’s feeling stretched in all these different directions. And he doesn’t want any of them. He just wants to retire in peace. Travel. Go play on the beach.”

She crinkled her nose. She couldn’t picture him being very comfortable in the sand. “The beach?”

“I know, right? Weirdest visual right there.” Weston’s green eyes had a tinge of sympathy. “I think the more we push him, the more he’ll push back. It’s a delicate balance.”

“Why do we have to be opposed at all, though? Why can’t both things happen at the same time?”

“You think kids belong on a five hundred-head cattle ranch? You don’t understand how things operate.”

“This place is huge, Weston. We can both do our thing. All I’m asking for is a bunkhouse, some stalls to muck, a small, covered seating area for classes, and plenty of work for the girls to do. Oh, and a few horses. I have the best horse therapist lined up.”

“Horses don’t need counseling.” His smirk was one for the books.

She tilted her head back and looked at him through narrowed eyes. “Please. Horses provide therapy and comfort for traumatized kids. They have the power to heal emotional wounds; I’ve seen it many times. And besides, they’re not kids. They’re teens. They’ll be between the ages of fifteen and seventeen.”

“Sounds worse than kids.”

She shook her head. She was done having this conversation with Weston Wade. “Please tell your grandfather I’ll come back later today. And give him my card?”

She’d recovered from her initial anger and had resigned herself to the fact that she couldn’t count on any help from Weston. Well, she’d mostly resigned herself. If Weston had been at all supportive of Rise Up, there might have been some

hope he could talk Earl into it. But he was fighting this as much as Earl was.

“Thanks for stopping by.” Weston’s voice was soft, maybe even a little contrite.

She tossed a glance back at him before going out the front entrance of the house. Man, but if he wasn’t so handsome and didn’t smell so good, she could chalk him up as just another cowboy with a chip on his shoulder, just another guy that she had to tolerate but feel nothing more for.

She’d seen what happens when women lead with their hearts and not their heads. She knew that by keeping God as her companion she could avoid the kind of misery that ill-advised love could bring.

If only Weston didn’t make her want to be stuck to him like glue.

She got in her car and made a U-turn, not looking back at the house. She tried to get her Bluetooth connected so she could drown out the uncomfortable and confusing thoughts of what had just happened with Weston.

Problem was, she was a little too focused on finding the right song than on the road, and before she knew it, halfway down the gravelly dirt lane, her car hit a slight hole. It roughly buckled down and up. Trying to course correct, she threw the steering wheel the opposite direction, and her car nose-dived into a swampy mud hole.

She felt the scream burn her throat, and just as the car lurched to a stop, she thought of two things: that she better not have busted up her car. And that Weston had better not have seen what just happened.

She groaned and was tempted to start swearing. The car was definitely stuck in the mud—it wouldn’t be at such an odd angle against the horizon if it weren’t. Her door was jammed shut. Whether from structural damage or just the heap of mud she was sitting in, she couldn’t tell. She hoped it was the latter.

Shame rolled over her. How would she ever convince Earl to give her a chance now? She couldn’t even drive down a

straight country lane completely free from traffic. How was she supposed to be able to pull the program off? Earl would never believe it.

She herself didn't believe it.

She sat there for a minute, wondering which scenario would cause the least amount of embarrassment. She could call Zane or Liam, both fellow Kids Night Out friends, to come pull her out. With any luck, neither Weston nor Earl would ever even know.

Zane was the fire chief in Silver Plum. He was massively strong and loved helping people. Liam, on the other hand, was fast, wiry, and skilled at thinking outside of the box. He and Tory had been married for over a year, and he worked as a financial planner in the same building as his wife.

Hmmm. Liam might not have as many fancy rescuing tools as Zane, but sometimes Zane wasn't the easiest to get ahold of.

She could ask Mack, but as the mayor of Silver Plum, he was arguably the busiest of them all.

There was also August, who was engaged to Hannah, one of her best friends since kindergarten. He worked on his large family estate, restoring it to even more beauty than before. Ruby had no doubt he'd come if she called—he was generous and kind. But he mostly kept to himself.

It was ridiculous that she even needed to ask anyone to help her. She was independent—Anjali had once told her she was pathologically independent, whatever that meant.

As she wallowed in questions, she felt more than heard a large clamp settling over her back bumper. She swiveled around, and there was Weston, his truck behind her and facing the house. He had a scowl of concentration as he tried to attach the clamping mechanism. He lifted his head just as it snapped into place, and his surly expression gave way to something of a smile as they locked gazes before he turned to get into the cab of his truck.

He was going to save her and her car from death by mud.

Chapter Seven

Weston gunned the gas pedal of his truck, adrenaline smacking into his chest. In his rear view mirror, he could see the chain on the back straighten just as Ruby's car jerked off to one side. He drove a couple more feet as the sludge gave up its captor and then a few feet more to straighten out the mud-covered mess that was Ruby's car.

His chest thrummed as his mind flashed back to seeing Ruby looking at him as he hitched the tow chain to her back bumper. Not only was she downright beautiful, but the look she gave him seemed equal parts embarrassment, gratitude, and frustration—and something else unnamed, almost wild. At least she hadn't seemed hurt. That was all he'd thought about when he saw her veer into the swamp.

He got out of the truck in time to see her open her door, rivulets of mud dripping down it. He rushed to meet her there.

"Well, I managed to get myself in a pickle, didn't I?" Ruby's cheeks flushed, and she glanced at the ground before gingerly stepping out with one foot.

Weston rested his arm on the top of her car door. "Are you hurt?" The hard thrumming in his chest didn't show any signs of subsiding.

She stared at him a moment and then finished climbing out of the car. She ignored his offered hand. "I'm fine. Just very embarrassed. Thank you for your help."

"It was no problem." A smile tickled his lips. "It was kind of fun."

“You like saving helpless women?” Her comment was a challenge. There was simply no right way to answer that question. Anything he might say to that would be offensive, probably.

“I will if I have to, but it didn’t seem like you were helpless.”

“Well, I couldn’t even open my car door with it submerged like that, so I guess I was. Do you make it a habit of helping defenseless women?”

“It’s not that I didn’t think you could do it, but that swamp is nasty. It wouldn’t have swallowed your car alive—this isn’t like the fire swamp from *The Princess Bride*—but you would have gotten your shoes and this ... nice outfit dirty.”

“Outfit? It’s a Toyota Camry. The word ‘outfit’ brings to mind a big semi-truck.”

“I wasn’t talking about the car.” He glanced at her again. He didn’t want to stare, and he certainly didn’t want to flirt with her. But ever since she’d knocked on his door, wearing ... it wasn’t a skirt, and it wasn’t a shirt ... more of a combination of the two stuck together. Intriguing. And it was especially exciting that it was tighter in all the right places and looser in others. If he wasn’t a more respectable chap, he would have liked to continue looking.

The dots of pink on her light tan cheeks deepened to a coral shade. She placed both fists on her face, as if she could feel the heat there. “This just goes to show that you should, maybe, um, turn on your music *before* you start driving.” She looked away, her eyes scanning the horizon. “I can’t believe how foolish I was.”

“No harm, no foul. We could all use reminders about that kind of thing. So, thank you for providing me with a reminder to leave my phone alone while I’m driving.”

“You’re welcome. Happy to be of service,” she muttered and stepped closer to her car, bending her knees to survey the damage. “But I beg to differ. There has been harm. Look at this mess.”

He let out a breath. “Yeah. That swamp has grown substantially since this whole water pipeline thing. My grandpa told me the mayor is drilling into the lava bedrock because Silver Plum has to share their water from the lake with Barlett?”

Ruby nodded. “Mack Duncan, who’s in the group of friends Tory was telling you about, is the mayor now. He’s already gotten the drilling done. It took a while to get everything set up and approved, but that major hurdle is over. Now he’s trying to connect all the water mains to it. It’s been a process.”

“My grandpa wasn’t so sure about it all. I mean, he’s for it on a business level. It’s much better for the ranch in general. But as he’s thinking less and less about what’s best for the ranch these days, he’s been more concerned about how the up and down water levels have caused the subwater in this area to surge.”

“Thus, the swamp my car found today.”

His shoulders came up in a laugh. “Exactly. It should all level out soon. But in the meantime, the farms around here haven’t been happy about the unpredictable water supply and all the changes.”

“So, they’d rather split their water in half and give it to Bartlett? They’ve been complaining about that for years.” She started walking towards the house, glancing back at her car. “Don’t tell me that the growing pains from a new and much better way are too much for them to handle.”

“Now, I’m not saying they’re right. I’m just passing along what I hear from my grandpa.”

She only looked at him, a smile curving the corners of her glossy mouth.

It seemed to be more than a romantic gaze—which wouldn’t have been so bad—so he had to ask. “Do I have dirt on me or something?”

“There’s a bit of mud right there,” she murmured in agreement, pointing at his brow.

He looked down at his mud-caked hands. When had that happened? He'd been so focused on getting her out of the mud that he hadn't realized how dirty he'd gotten.

"If we don't get it off, it's going to hurt trying to wash it off later." She pointed to his mud-caked hands. "And you can't do that yourself."

He breathed as she returned to her car, opened the glove compartment, and grabbed a container of wipes. In a moment, she had a cold sheet placed above his eye, holding it in place. He sucked in a breath. The feeling came again, that her touch was a memory of something he'd known before.

Her eyes widened a little as she worked to remove the mud on his forehead. Did she feel it, too?

"Looks like it's my turn to save you now. This reminds me of when I was little. Deja vu." She shook her head. "Weird."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

A honk startled them, and they jumped apart.

Earl rolled down his driver's side window and leaned on it with his arm. "What kind of trouble are you two in?" His words were menacing, but his smile gave away his teasing.

"The swamp's to blame here," Weston said. "But we got her taken care of."

Ruby placed a hand on Weston's shoulder, and the warmth of her seeped through his shirt to his skin.

"No. I'm to blame. I wasn't paying attention." She winced. "I'm sorry for the trouble."

"It's no skin off my nose." Earl gave an encouraging smile. "Is there something I can help you with?"

This was interesting. Instead of the harsh words he'd spoken to Weston about Ruby and her schemes, Gramps seemed a lot more open and relaxed. Which could only be a good thing, right?

Ruby seemed to notice the shift, as well. "I've come to talk to you one more time about the Rise Up program for at-risk

teen girls.” Her voice was strong, with only a hint of an apology.

Gramps looked back and forth between the two of them, measuring her words. “And Weston ran you out of the house with a big no, I take it?”

Weston’s gasp of surprise came out at the same time that Ruby laughed. “Not in so many words, no,” she said. “I told him I’d come back a little later today. I figured it wouldn’t hurt to have one more conversation with you about it.”

Gramps sighed heavily. “You two just don’t let up, do you? And I have a feeling no matter what I do or say, it will be wrong.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to talk with her one more time.” Weston shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind learning more about this program she’s put together.”

Gramps eyed him suspiciously. “Oh, really? You haven’t heard the whole spiel yet, so I get why you’d have questions.”

Gramps just had to drag this out, didn’t he? Weston’s parents often talked about Gramps’s stubborn streak, and Weston hadn’t realized just how right they were until these last few days.

Ruby held up a hand. “I don’t want to do this if either of you are uncomfortable.” Something about the set of her jaw told him that she was beginning to give up, and Weston’s feelings about that warred within him.

She glanced at Weston. “But I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to explain why this program is so important to me ... and why it’s something all of Silver Plum needs to start caring about.”

Gramps tipped back his head, his eyes showing approval. Or acquiescence. Weston couldn’t tell.

“I tell you what. Why don’t you drive around back of the house, and Weston here will spray your car off for you while I get out some muffins and lemonade, and we’ll discuss this some more.” Before either of them could respond, Gramps drove away, rolling up his window without a backward glance.

It didn't take long for Ruby to try to kibosh the idea before Weston so much as started unwinding the pressure hose from the detached garage behind the ranch's main house.

"I can go get a carwash in town. You don't need to wash my car for me." Her eyes flashed at him. "You've already helped me."

"There's not a limit on how many times a person can help another, is there? Besides, I didn't think Silver Plum even had a carwash."

"The gas station had one once upon a time, but it broke down, and no one ever fixed it. But we just pay Tim, the guy who repairs the cars around here, a couple of dollars to use his pressure wash pump he's got in his garage."

"Why don't I save you the couple of dollars right now? Like you said yourself, once this mud sets, it's hard to get off."

She paused, a look of annoyance on her face.

"You are about as stubborn as Gramps is, aren't you?" Weston said. "Will you just let me rinse it down at least?"

"Fine. But I'll help."

"Not in those clothes, you won't."

"I think your Gramps's stubbornness has rubbed off on you. You're just as belligerent as he is." Ruby grabbed the hose from his hands.

That was his first mistake. He should not have been holding the hose too loosely.

He watched as she sprayed, and then he took a turn. They stood in silence, but his eyes kept meeting hers, and each time, she challenged his gaze. And they only sprayed each other with the water a little bit.

This woman. She had a way of getting under his skin in the most frustrating and exciting ways.

Maybe he'd been going about this all wrong. Maybe he'd been so blinded by his core need for the ranch to become his

that he couldn't see the truth that was staring him in the face:
that Ruby Garza's plans might not be in the way of his own.

Maybe he'd have to eat a little bit of crow. Maybe he'd
have to figure out a way for them both to get what they want.

Chapter Eight

Ruby and Weston followed Earl Wade into his house, but this time, instead of being shown to the sitting room at the end of the long hallway, Earl pointed to the left corner of the entry. In her visits to the house before, she'd either spoken to Earl at the door or in the sitting room. But this time, he led her into the kitchen.

It was all light wood, rubbed and varnished with a sheen reminiscent of the 1960s. The countertops looked newer, a warm, cream-colored soapstone. All throughout the room were touches of the past, but in pristine condition and definitely feminine: hand towels with crocheted and buttoned tops, a black metal rooster on the wall, a silk floral arrangement on the table that had tones of burgundy and forest green.

“This kitchen is beautiful,” Ruby said, taking in the whole scene. “It’s so big, too. There’s enough space to host a party in here.”

Weston nodded and crossed his arms over his chest, and Ruby looked away before she ogled his muscular arms for too long.

Earl’s brows raised. “Louise expanded it after we moved in. The ranch belonged to my parents, so for several years, we lived in a small house up on the hill. Then, when my dad passed on, we moved in here, and Louise took out a couple of walls, and expanded the whole thing.”

“It’s got charm in spades.” Ruby didn’t want Earl to think she was trying to win him over by complimenting the house. But it really was a treasure, and she couldn’t help herself.

She walked to the end of the room, to the place where the sunken living room met the kitchen, and pointed to a photograph on the wall. It was a color photograph, but it had faded, and the curls and taffeta dress of the woman looked like it had been taken in the 1950s.

“Is this Louise?” she asked.

Weston joined her, and she could feel the heat emanating from him. The smell of him was in her nose, too. “Grandma loved this photo of herself.”

At Ruby’s and Earl’s polite laughs, he went on. “A rancher’s wife has a steep price to pay. You give up a lot. The work is exhausting and never ending. But Grandma seemed happy. She told me she loved this photo of herself because she got to get dressed up, go out, and sort of remember what life was like beyond the ranch.”

“You’re right, Wes, but there’s more to it than that.” Earl joined them, his eyes growing soft at the sight of his beautiful wife, the woman he’d had to live without for the past ten years. It was that look again, the one she’d seen in so many couples’ eyes lately, a look of fierce love. “See the earrings? They were made by one of the girls at the high school. Louise had taken her in for a while when she needed some help. I was busy with the ranch, but Louise made this girl a top priority even though we had young children of our own.”

“The earrings look almost like ... brooches?”

“Yes, they were tiny silhouettes. Don’t ask me how she made them, but she found some old gold earrings at the pawn shop in Pocatello, saved up her money, and went back to buy them. Then she attached the silhouettes to the earrings. Looked professionally made, if you ask me.”

“They’re beautiful,” Ruby said. It struck her that Louise had made a difference in a child’s life, and Earl could do the same.

Earl asked her to sit, and she chose a low, buckskin colored sofa, cracked and worn but with the soothing leather smell still present. Earl sat in the recliner, but instead of taking the other

recliner, Weston sat next to Ruby, stretching his long legs out and leaning back.

I wonder how many times he sat here, in this very room, when he was growing up?

For a moment, an image of boyish and precocious Weston came to mind. She squashed it. She couldn't have endearing thoughts about him. She didn't want to reconstruct his life story in her head, because then she would be way too invested for her own good.

“So, give me your spiel again, Ruby,” Earl said, with only a little more patience than he'd afforded her before.

Taking a deep breath, she started. This felt completely different than before because this time, she had to go deep. She could do it, right? She lived for hard conversations. Because of her life calling of social work, the fluffy, surface talk was almost a nuisance sometimes.

“I've had the opportunity to work with hundreds of women and children in my four-year career at the Women's and Children's Center. While there is a small, functioning shelter at the Center, it's used for so much more than that. We offer education on family systems, anger management, life skills, all kinds of things.”

“Why are you telling me about the Women's and Children's place? Isn't that in Rexburg?”

Ruby hesitated. She hadn't told many people about the real reason she was trying to get this program off the ground. Vulnerability reared up inside her head. But she had to. Her gut told her it was time to pull out all the stops—including this one that had felt so impossible and painful.

Please, God. Give me strength.

“One of our best programs at the Center has been for teen mothers.” She paused, hesitant. “I didn't tell you about Chantel because it's difficult. I didn't realize how relevant the topic was. But it's Chantel. Chantel and her daughter. They're the reason I want to run this program. The reason I have to do this.”

With his gaze trained on her, Weston leaned forward on his knees, the warmth from him oddly comforting.

“Go on,” Earl encouraged.

She swallowed, gently pressing her hand to the base of her throat, hoping the pain would subside. “I met Chantel when she came into the Center for our teen mother program. She was sixteen years old, ten weeks along, and—” Ruby smiled broadly. “She was a ball of energy. She lifted people, you know? She and I bonded, and when she was about 20 weeks into the pregnancy, she asked me if I would adopt her baby.”

Both Earl’s and Weston’s eyes popped out of their heads.

“You both look surprised.” Ruby laughed. “But not as surprised as I was. I was shocked. I’d never considered adoption before—not seriously. And I didn’t know if I had it in me. As a single woman, I wanted Chantel’s baby to be raised by both a mother and a father. I didn’t feel ready for such a high responsibility.”

The more she said, the better it felt. The words started tumbling out, her head trying to talk her out of it, but her gut telling her to keep going. “I and everyone at the Center tried to steer Chantel to other families, families who were ready to adopt. There were great candidates. We often work closely with both public and private agencies for our girls who come in, and boy did we work hard to try to find someone Chantel felt comfortable with. But she wouldn’t budge. She told me she knew I was meant to be her child’s mother.”

A studded ball formed in Ruby’s throat, and her hands began to shake.

“I can tell you’d be a good mother, Ruby.” Weston’s gaze was steady, like he was willing her to believe him.

She tore her gaze from the floor and glanced at him. His eyes were kind—maybe he was being honest.

She gave a low, bitter snort. “It wasn’t meant to be.” She shrugged, chewing on her bottom lip before continuing. “I worked to get all the paperwork done, the home visits, the evaluations ...”

Ruby didn't say anything about the gnawing worry that consumed her sometimes or about the guilt that she had about being given the opportunity to become a mother when so many others had been waiting far too long. She hadn't even really been waiting at all ... until Chantel had asked her. It had felt as if one minute, she'd just been regular, old Ruby, and then the next, she was being asked to do the hardest, most magnificent thing: to love and raise the child of a girl who was still just a child herself.

"But long story short, it didn't work out." The back of her neck burned, the pain of it suddenly white-hot again. "Chantel changed her mind after the birth. Her daughter is being raised by Chantel now." She cleared her throat and dug around in her bag to produce a folder. It was easier to read from it than try to come up with the words on the fly.

"Anyway, in my prepared documents for the financial backers, the match donors, and the foundation who is the umbrella organization, I explain why I'm doing this program." She glanced at Earl and Weston, who were both serious, upset, sad ... everything she could have asked them to be. "Part of what I wrote was—" She struggled to find the words on the page through the spring of tears in her eyes. "I want to give at-risk young girls the opportunity to acquire the life skills that can only be learned through intensive, small group study by a compassionate team consisting of an equine-assisted therapist, a supervisor in charge of the day-to-day needs like food and clothing, and the facilitator."

Ruby lifted a finger. "That's me," she added with a laugh. "I'll run the program, help select and secure the participants, just do everything that's necessary for them to feel supported and loved. I want to give them a leg up before any more life-altering things might occur. And, hopefully, prevent some of those things, too."

The room was silent, the only sounds coming from a barking dog out back and a ticking cuckoo clock on the mantel.

Ruby's heart went back to its galloping pace. She couldn't say anything more, even if she wanted to. It was now in Earl

and Weston Wade's hands. And she had no idea what they would say.

Chapter Nine

Earl Wade sat motionless in his recliner. The only movement was his eyes as they darted everywhere around the room besides Ruby.

Her heart constricted. *He's going to tell me no*, she thought.

She didn't dare turn her head to look at Weston. She'd just shared ... a lot ... and she couldn't look in his eyes just yet.

"Would you come back on Saturday, Ruby?" Earl pushed the automatic button on his recliner and waited for the footrest to go down. Finally, he stood, stretching and arching his back.

Would I come back on Saturday? Come back, as in, beg to use his ranch again?

As she stuttered to answer, Weston spoke up. "Gramps, what kind of a question is that? She's obviously laid it all out on the line here, and that's what you have to say?"

She was touched by his need to defend her. Since when did their warring goals suddenly come together?

But she could do this on her own. And by do this, she meant leave while she still had some dignity intact. Possibly.

"No, Weston, it's okay. I have to go now." She fumbled to put the folder back in the bag. "I can come back on Saturday if that would be a help to you in some way." Her mind was sifting through ideas of why he wanted her to come back.

Earl nodded. "I've got some projects around here that—no offense, Wes—are better suited for Ruby here, I think." He took the steps to the kitchen. "Just stop by on Saturday

morning for a couple of hours, would you? I'd be very appreciative."

He didn't say another word as he crossed the kitchen and entered a hall beyond it.

Weston's mouth was hanging open, his brow furrowed.

Ruby felt like she should be doing something with her hands but couldn't figure out what. She settled for crossing them over her middle. Why didn't this jumper have pockets like any good, self-respecting jumper should?

"I guess I'll be seeing you on Saturday." She tried to smile—to take it in stride. At least this was better than a flat-out no, right? Maybe giving Earl more time to think about it would be a good thing.

Weston's green eyes were soft. "I'm not sure why he's asking you to come back." He pointed to the hall behind him. "I can go ask him for some details ... I just. I'm not sure—"

"No. It's fine. I don't mind coming over. I love this ranch, remember? It's a special place and ..." She shrugged. "You know what? I should have mentioned the lease money from the foundation again. I hope he remembers this isn't going to cost him anything."

"You don't have to convince me anymore." When he smiled, a small dimple in his chin popped out. How did she never notice the dimple? It was subtle, but now that she'd seen it, she'd never be able to unsee it. Which was a good thing.

Wait. Was Weston on board? Her grin was teasing, but she tried to rein it in. "What made you see the light?"

His gaze was challenging her. "I liked your explanation." He hesitated and took a step closer. "And maybe we can both work on Gramps. Maybe we both want the same things. In a roundabout way."

She took him in, all of his over-six-foot frame. "I think you're right. In a roundabout way."

She fought the urge to reach out to him. *What if I were to put my arms around his neck and pull him close right now?*

She shivered at the thought but still held her ground.

His gaze burned through the air like the shimmer from a campfire, just out of reach, not quite real enough to capture.

She had to leave. Love brought a lot of misery to a lot of people. It did to Chantel, and by extension, Ruby herself.

When she reached the part of the hall that expanded into the entryway, she turned and smiled. “Thanks again for helping me today.”

“I learned early on that I liked helping the damsel in distress.”

Instantly, she felt her smile fade. “So what you’re saying is you’ve been saving women and breaking hearts since you were young?”

He nodded, but then seemed to not be able to keep up with the façade of the player he was trying to sport. A look of humility washed over his handsome face. “I have the scar to prove it.” His small smile begged something of her.

“Oh yeah? Where?” She challenged, but there wasn’t much umph left in her. She was all jelly and airy bubbles.

He touched his eyebrow above his left eye where a small, white scar showed.

“You’ll have to tell me the story sometime,” Ruby said, cursing herself when her voice nearly cracked.

He only nodded, his gaze roaming over her face.

She left without saying anything more, but she did manage to smile.

This man was a mystery. That one thing was sure. The rest of this whole situation, like why on earth Earl asked her to come back on Saturday, made no sense at all.

“Okay, Gramps. I think it’s break time,” Weston stood from Earl’s cramped office, the whole of him taking up the most

space in the room. Ruby was enjoying noticing those little things about him. Or in this case, big things about him.

She'd already discovered he liked salmon, but not fish and chips. And that he was cuter than a June bug when he was in second grade, as per a photo she found in a desk drawer. Oh, and that he absolutely, one hundred percent, thought his grandfather walked on water, even though he didn't want people to notice.

And it was downright adorable.

"Eat a dried plum first." Earl Wade held out a package of plums he'd found in one of the desk drawers.

Ruby took a plum and surveyed the room as she chewed. She loved a good project, especially when it involved cleaning out closets and drawers that didn't belong to her. She wasn't emotionally attached to this stuff, so it was easier to be objective.

Except that wasn't entirely true. Because the more time she spent with Weston, the more she *wanted* to become emotionally attached.

Weston stood in the corner, looking out the window. "The plowed field looks good, Gramps. We should be able to plant on Monday if the weather's dry enough."

"You did well on that field. There hasn't been hay there for many years. Except, I don't know why we need a bunch of hay."

"There's so much untapped potential here. Besides, if we don't end up using it all, we can sell it."

Earl only nodded and then launched into a long, tall tale about the plum tree and all that had happened to it since he planted it twenty-five years before.

They'd been working for a couple of hours on cleaning out the office, and Ruby was ready for a break.

"Earl, Weston and I can find something for lunch if you want to stay here and keep sorting."

“Now, hold up a minute here.” He whistled. “Hold. Up. A. Minute. Here.”

Ruby leaned over to see. “You must have found some buried treasure.”

“Better. Better than treasure. Better than gold.” He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “Wes, look at this.”

Beaming, Earl held up a model truck from the bottom of the largest desk drawer. It fit in both palms of his rough, weather-worn hands.

Ruby tracked Weston’s face, a mixture of surprise and happiness and maybe some kind of reservation. A hesitancy.

“Let me see that. You’ve got to be kidding me. I always wondered where that thing ended up.” He grabbed it from Earl and turned the orange and blue truck over in his hands, rubbing his thumb along the smooth surface. He looked at Ruby. “It’s one of those wood models that you piece together with glue and sandpaper. And that wise! Gramps, you used to get so mad.”

Earl frowned, but the smiles were still shining in his eyes. “I sure did. It was a delicate procedure, Ruby. Once you located the right piece and sanded it till you thought your fingers would fall off, then you had to sit there and hold the doggone piece into place for what felt like hours.”

“Yeah, it was a huge pain. But I’m glad we did it.” Weston’s eyes were staring off into the distance.

“Me, too, Wes.”

“And Grandma sure got a kick out of it.”

Earl chuckled. “Well, she better have. She was the one who bought it and told us to put it together. She was just trying to make us spend time together. And she knew we couldn’t watch TV while we did it because we had to concentrate on what we were doing. So, what else are you going to do but talk?”

“Grandma was an evil genius, tricking us like that.”

Ruby wanted to let the two of them walk down memory lane together, but her curiosity got the best of her, and she finally asked, “When did you build it? It’s so intricate.”

“I was fifteen.” Wes had that far off look again, and this time, it seemed memories were slamming into him faster than he could process them.

“It must have taken a long time. Were you here for a while?”

Earl and Weston shared a look. “Well, it was decided that it would be beneficial for all parties involved that Wes should move here for the summer. He was working a lot to earn his keep, so to speak.”

“You kept me working, Gramps.”

“I needed the help. I was down several ranch hands and was in a bind. Besides, we needed to get the city out of this boy. Teach him what real work was.”

Ruby laughed. “So, was it a success? Did you learn what real work was?”

“I did,” Weston said. “I can’t say I loved it. The work was hot, cutting and baling the hay, and we went up on the bench with the cattle a lot of times, so there was the travel back and forth and feeding the horses, that kind of thing.”

“But then in the evenings, we’d collapse in front of the television,” Earl said.

“And Grandma thought we should talk more,” Weston added.

“So, she bought us this model, and I wanted to chuck it in the garbage half the time.” Earl pursed his lips in thought. “But by the end of the summer, Louise’s mysterious purposes all made sense, as they usually did.”

“Yeah, Gramps and I were friends, I had my head on straight, and I started seriously thinking about joining the family business here instead of going for the corporate life like my dad.”

Earl and Weston shared a look.

Ruby surprised herself with a thought.

Maybe they both walk on water.

And maybe Weston had had a hard time as a youth? Was that what he meant when he said the ranch helped him get his head on straight? It wasn't that she was too concerned about what he'd done. She knew teen anguish. She saw it and worked with it every day. It hurt to think he might have gone through that.

"You know, Ruby. You remind me a little of Louise," Earl said, bringing his fist up to his chin.

"That's a nice compliment, from all I've learned about her."

"I wish you could have known her. I wish she was still here. She was taken too soon, and I've never—well, I've never gotten past it." Earl swallowed thickly.

"I don't think you're supposed to," Ruby said. "She was the love of your life."

Weston nodded. "You never stop hurting, but you learn to live with it. We've all sort of learned to live with it." Again, he had that look of sadness in his eyes that only hard memories can bring.

"Yeah, but then you meet people like Ruby and see the good she's doing in the world, and you think, maybe I can keep on living because there are people like Ruby picking up where Louise left off." Earl swiped his hand through the air, as if to say he was done being sentimental.

Later, after they'd boxed and taped and thrown away, Ruby said goodbye and headed out to her car. She hadn't realized she'd stayed so long. The clouds were brilliantly white along the cerulean sky. It would have been nice to show the girls a sky like this.

A ball puckered in her throat. It would have been healing to show them a sky like this. But that wasn't going to happen.

Right as she was opening the door, Weston came running, his strides long, his hands in casual fists as his arms pumped

smoothly.

“Ruby!” He reached her and took a shallow breath. “Gramps says he’ll do it. He’ll let you have Rise Up here at Wade Ranch.”

She’d been starved below her cool exterior, desperate as an alley cat curling around Gramps’s ankles.

But Weston’s words and face full of delight were like comfort food for her sadness. The Rise Up program was going to happen. Maybe the hurt she’d gone through could begin to make sense now.

Chapter Ten

Weston lay in bed, the flannel sheets reminding him of childhood. He couldn't sleep, his mind agitated with memories and unwelcome thoughts.

Ruby. That smile, that ease. The way she'd handled Gramps had been a thing of beauty. She was real with him yet polite enough to remind Gramps of Grandma. That had been a surprise. And though Weston didn't really see it, that was okay.

Ruby had done it. She'd managed to poke a hole in Gramps's resolve. Weston still wasn't sure how it happened, but he knew one thing: the ranch would live to play another day.

In essence, that's all he really cared about. And so far, Gramps had not asked him to cancel his order for the hundred head. Winning! Weston could still do his thing, put the cattle up in the high country, grazing land that had been in the family for generations, and hire on a couple of hands. With any luck, he could find Blake and Federico, the guys who'd been involved in the ranch in some capacity for as long as Weston could remember. They'd slowly stopped coming around when they began running out of things to do. Gramps mentioned they dropped by sometimes to say hello for a bit—or to talk for hours because when the three of them got talking, there was no stopping them.

He'd have to go out to the grazing land and see if the little house out there was still in good condition. He was betting it wasn't, so he'd need to plan some time to get it liveable again. But if there was going to be a program for at-risk teens here at

the ranch, they'd also need to get the place ready for that. Oh, and he still needed to plant some more alfalfa because they needed hay to feed these cows when they got them.

His thoughts turned to Ruby again, and this time, instead of wallowing in them, he got up out of bed and snuck out onto the back deck. Sure enough, just like he'd hoped, tonight was a full moon up high above him. Or was it now in the waning gibbous stage? He smiled as he remembered Grandma teaching him the moon phases. Seemed like she knew the moon like the nose on her face, and she made sure the grandkids paid attention to it.

To her, it held a power that was without compare. And now, as Weston looked at it with fresh eyes, the eyes of a man who'd begun to get to know a woman like Ruby, he finally knew what Grandma had meant.

“So, technically, you're a city guy with a cowboy heart?” Ruby shot him a glance, then got back to work—getting the bunkhouse ready for the program participants. For now, she was washing down walls with a scrub brush on a long handle.

“That's a good way of putting it, but I'm not 'city' so much anymore. If Laramie could even be called a city.”

“Which it can't,” Ruby deadpanned. “I've been there.”

He chuckled, pulling out a nail from one of the studs in the walls. They were getting ready for the participants to come, and they needed to HGTV this old bunkhouse back into a suitable place for the girls to sleep in.

“I haven't lived in Laramie for years, though. Not since I finished college.”

“And after college? What did you do?” She was wearing a black T-shirt and cream shorts. It was funny how beautiful she looked in both casual work clothes and business wear. Except not “haha funny.” Dangerous.

“I went to live on the first ranch that offered me a job and ended up staying there five years. Then I got hired on as the foreman for a much larger operation, and I’ve been doing that for the past three years.” He felt an air of potential at Tillman Ranch. He’d recently been given the option to become an investor in it and had jumped at the chance.

“And now you’re here to ...?” Ruby’s question hung in the air.

“I’m here because Gramps asked me to come. The owner of that ranch in Wyoming, Tillman Ranch, wasn’t happy to see me go. But when Gramps needs a favor, I’m going to come.”

Her brows knit together, and she plunged the scrub brush into a bucket of soapy water. “But he wanted you to help him shut everything down.”

A niggle of frustration wormed its way into his chest. “Which I didn’t know. Gramps said he’d made that clear over the years, that someday he’d need help tying up all the loose ends, and believe me, with a ranch, there are a lot of loose ends. I knew he’d started selling off some of the equipment here and there. And he’d had one of the barns demoed last fall. But I had no idea he was ready to really shut things down.”

“Why not sell?”

Now the niggle was a full-blown flame. Weston was mama bear over the ranch—possessive didn’t even begin to cover what he felt. “Something about not wanting to give up control and then seeing it ruined by mismanagement. He even mentioned breaking it off into smaller lots and selling it like that just to avoid having to watch it fail. But I’ve explained that I wouldn’t let that happen. A lesser rancher, maybe.” He winked. “But not me. This ranch is where I want to be. It deserves to be fully operational again. I know the kind of profit they were pulling in back in the day, and I’m sure I could double that now within a couple of years.”

“Sounds lucrative.”

“It has the potential to be, no question. But this isn’t about the money. This is about family, tradition ...” He took a step

closer to her. “Roots . . . all that stuff.”

She lowered the scrub brush back in the water. “So, no one else in your family wants it? Are you the only one who’s trying to restore it?”

Weston sighed. “My dad and uncle both left the ranch when they each turned eighteen. They majored in business and banking and never really looked back.”

“From what I’ve seen, that’s not very common, to leave the ranching life behind and make such a clean cut away.”

“Gramps wanted them to stay and eventually take things over. It stung when they both decided it wasn’t for them. And when they married women who hadn’t grown up on ranches, that really decided things. Except, you can’t ever completely get the country out of a person. Both my dad and my uncle bought properties that had animal rights. We raised chickens and goats. And we always had horses that we’d board at other places and go riding on the weekends.”

Ruby slid a handkerchief over her head and brought it over her mouth and nose. Her voice was muffled under the fabric. “So if you weren’t raised on a ranch, what made you want to come back? This hard work kinda sucks.” Ruby had switched to scratching old paint off the paneling with a wire brush. She made a show of putting a lot of elbow grease into it and then even made power tool noises with her mouth.

What was she talking about? Boring labor like scraping paint off a wall was fun, as long as she was around.

“It didn’t start out that way. When we’d visit, I always felt at home but never imagined I’d want to run it someday. It wasn’t until I was fifteen that things shifted for me.”

“That’s when you came for the summer, right? What happened then?”

“It’s not interesting enough to tell. But by the end of that summer here, I finally had a direction I wanted to go in life.”

“And you haven’t looked back since.”

“Nope.” Weston smiled and rested his shoulder against the wall near her. “You know, I should be angry at you.”

“Well, that’s a weird thing to say.” Her nostrils flared, and she tossed him a look.

“I said I *should* be. But I’m not.”

Ruby set the brush into the bucket of water and turned to him. Her hair, which had been pulled back into a ponytail, was starting to slip out. To Weston, it seemed too shiny to stay put. She was beautiful. But her eyes were blazing.

“And why is that?”

“Because I’m here in this bunkhouse instead of tending to my hay field.”

“Go on with your bad self.” She made a shooing motion. “I’m fine here alone.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I should want to work on the field, but I’d rather be here with you. And I should be upset that Gramps is letting you use the ranch for your passion, but he still hasn’t given me the green light on mine.”

“There are a lot of ‘shoulds’ in what you’re saying. I’ve told you before, there’s plenty of room here for us both to do our thing. And by the time you bring the cattle down from the higher elevation so they can bed down for the winter here, my girls will be long gone. It’s a win-win for both of us.”

“Except that’s the problem. Gramps is still counting on me to help with the demo of another building next week. And he’s not actively complaining about the hundred head, but I can tell that’s not what he wanted.”

“He’s the boss.”

“He is the boss. But he’s also sitting on a huge acreage of unused land. He doesn’t want to sell—at least not in its entirety as a ranch—and he doesn’t want to continue to ranch on it.”

“And you should be mad at me, why?”

“I’ve just explained why!”

She stepped nearer to him, shaking her head. As she approached him, she slid the elastic from her hair, and it pooled around her face and down her back. “You’re difficult, Weston Wade.”

“Oh yeah?” He wanted to squeeze her waist and pull her closer to him. It would have been so natural to do that. But he held off. “What do you plan to do about it?”

“Nothing.” Her lips teased into a smile, and then she trapped her bottom lip with her teeth as if to stop herself from saying anything more.

They stared at each other, and Weston’s heart boxed against his rib cage. This woman was fire and ice, and he wanted more of it. More of her.

He’d heard that when you meet “the one,” it can feel like you’ve known them before. Or that you’ve always known them. At least, that’s what his mom said when she told him about meeting his dad.

It just felt so normal and right. Like bam! Suddenly they’re in your life, and all the pieces that you never knew were missing are suddenly into place, his mom had said.

Maybe there was going to be something redeeming about this whole experience of scraping off old paint and fixing up this old bunkhouse.

“I’ll just be keeping a close eye on you.” She finished and then walked away, not looking back.

Vixen, Weston thought. *This is going to be fun.*

Chapter Eleven

Ruby surveyed the bunkhouse, her heart and the room both in shambles. *This is crazy. What have I gotten myself into?*

When she'd told Magda that she'd gotten the go-ahead to use Wade Ranch, they'd both jumped up and down like kids high on Easter Peeps.

Now, the dread of an inability to get the task done watered down the excitement and sense of purpose she'd felt earlier. This bunkhouse was going to be a beast. The whole program was going to be a beast to figure out.

She'd thought she was so ready. She'd spent over a year of her life thinking of every possibility, of writing, preparing, and planning everything out.

Of course she had. She'd religiously used a planner, either digital or paper, since she was eleven years old. That was a must for someone with ADHD, and who cares if it was a mess and sometimes illegible?

But now, in the fog of dust mites and old, untreated wood, her thoughts gave way to panic. In two months' time, this bunkhouse would house eight girls, poised on the summer that would—hopefully—change their lives.

It was a little much to process.

She pushed a stiff broom across the floor, sweeping up the paint shards that littered it. At least that part was done. Now she had to purchase mattresses and bedding, paint the

moldings brown, hang blinds and curtains, and fix the broken drawers in the dressers.

Not too much to do in the few weeks she had until Magda came to pass the venue off. Not much at all.

There was paperwork to fix—like the places where Magda told her to make it more personal to convince the foundation that she was the right person to do this. There were guidelines and by-laws to adhere to.

And she had to narrow down the possible participants and begin contacting them.

She'd somehow felt God in those dull, heavy weeks they had to live in her parents' van when she was little. Somehow, some way, the bible reading they'd done on and off over the years had punctuated her beliefs at an early age.

But it wasn't like it was easy to keep believing. During her graduate program, when she'd met with people face-to-face who'd been through the most horrific experiences, she'd doubted God. She'd seen their eyes; she'd seen what trauma, neglect, hunger, and abuse did to people. So yeah, there were times she felt like she was in a Judy Blume novel.

Were you even up there, God? It's me, Ruby. Why would terrible things happen if you were really up there?

And then, she'd have an experience that would remind her that there really was a God who was all-knowing and all-loving. She'd see kindnesses and bonds formed between strangers there in the shelters, she'd see these people, the very same ones who'd undergone unimaginable horrors, begin to smile, to actually smile, as some of the terror began to fade. She saw teen moms coming back years later, happy, stable, and healthy, coming to visit with their children in tow.

It was those moments that she remembered that there was a God in Heaven who wanted nothing more than the happiness of each of His children, but He valued the right to choose so much that He couldn't jump in and save everyone all of the time.

A rustling in the long grass near the bunkhouse startled her, and she glanced out the open window to see Weston standing on the edge of it. He was facing away from her, his red and blue plaid shirt untucked, the sleeves rolled up, his hat on his head. His forearms were sinewy, and the way the veins stretched over the muscles had her stomach abuzz with honeybees.

Delicious, delicious man. Not only did he have the perfect V shape in his shoulders and back, but it was like he didn't know it. His attractive body came from hard work, not in front of the mirror at the Sun Babes Gym in Bartlett, the next town over.

No, Silver Plum didn't have a gym. Yes, many people would rather work out using a punch card at the small high school weight room than go over to Bartlett and use theirs.

But that was beside the point. The thing was, Weston had it all, and her heart yearned for him. Cautiously. He was smart, logical, and he loved fiercely. Hanging out with his grandpa and hearing their banter back and forth and the love that emanated from Weston had the same effect on her as if he'd shown up at her door shirtless and in wranglers and boots, cooing at a baby and petting a kitten he'd rescued. She was downright gaga over it.

And don't even get her started on how his eyes lit up when he talked about his grandmother. The way he loved was more of a power surge on her broken-down heart than anything else.

Her mind drifted as she bent to sweep up the pile of dirt and paint chips.

"Hey," Weston said.

There he was, standing in the doorway, the sun behind him so she couldn't see his face very well. He wasn't shirtless like in her fantasy just now. But that was okay. Clothed Weston was just as good as the topless version that had been on her mind.

She stood from her crouched position, proud of herself that she hadn't gotten dizzy on the way up with all those unholy

thoughts.

“Hey, yourself. How’s the new alfalfa coming in?”

“It hasn’t grown in much yet, but it’s early still. Want to help me cut it in a couple months?” His grin was sheepish, and he wiped his brow under his hat.

“If helping means getting you lemonade while you do all the grunt work, then sure.” That was another healthy image in her mind, him working and her bringing him a cold glass of lemonade like a 50s housewife.

Her equal rights, feminist heart should have yelled at herself for that, but it kept its mouth shut.

He stepped toward her. “It takes at least two people.”

His walk towards her had her heart hammering in her chest. Nobody else existed in this world when he walked to her like that. “Well, what would my duties be?”

“There’s the baler, but I’ll drive that. You could run the stack wagon.” He’d stopped in front of her, and she couldn’t figure out where to rest her eyes, he was so good-looking. But more than that, the rush of knowing him from before, of feeling she could be herself around him, came back up.

“I’ve never driven a stack wagon before.”

“But you’ve worked in the spuds before, right? During the harvest? It’s not much different than driving a combine to pick up the potatoes.”

“I never got to drive the combine. I was one of the underlings throwing out the weeds and rocks.”

“Hmmm. That is a disadvantage. Maybe you’re right, maybe you should just be the lemonade fetcher.”

“I’m good for a lot more than that.” She placed her hand on his shoulder and gave him a playful shove.

“Oh, I know you are.” He touched her shoulder and gave her the slightest push, his eyes dancing. “And I have a feeling I’ve only seen a small portion of all the great things you do.” The dimple in his chin made its appearance.

Wait, this was getting to be too much. If her experiences with Chantel and the baby had taught her anything, it was to not give her heart the okay to hope. She could not do this without getting hurt at some point down the line. Her breath hitched, and she spun the conversation.

“Like eat several McDonald’s cheeseburgers in one sitting?”

He sputtered a laugh, but that did little to curb the intensity between them. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for a McDonald’s lover.”

“It’s my secret obsession. Silver Plum doesn’t have one, and neither does Bartlett or any other little town near here. You have to drive to Rexburg to get a McDonald’s cheeseburger, so naturally, it’s best to stock up.”

“Naturally. And you’re not the only one with a secret food obsession.”

“Oh yeah, what’s yours?”

He winced. “I eat Doritos for breakfast sometimes?” The way he cocked one eyebrow up while half shutting his other eye cracked her up.

“Don’t ranchers need to eat hearty breakfasts of eggs and biscuits and gravy? So you have the energy to herd cows and stuff?”

“Don’t wrinkle your nose at me, Ruby. Sometimes there’s only time for Doritos.” He’d eased closer to her, and his subtle spicy musk about did her in.

“You’re crazy.”

“How about I take you to McDonald’s sometime?” His mouth pressed to one side as he waited for an answer. He seemed ... vulnerable. She liked it.

“Are you asking me out?”

“If your definition of a hot date is to McDonald’s then, wow, I’m more than okay with that.” He gave a barely-there chuckle. “Let’s set the bar low here.”

“Is there a bar to even be set?”

“Is there?”

“I don’t know. All I know is I never thought talking about farm equipment and junk food would have me feeling this way.”

He rested his hand on her elbow. “And what way is that?”

Like I could fly, holding your hand, side by side with you, she wanted to say. But she couldn’t because if she said that out loud, it would sound silly.

But then she saw his brilliant green eyes and wondered if maybe it wouldn’t.

And then it was too late.

Chapter Twelve

“I found the gas-powered edger!” Gramps came into the bunkhouse carrying it in both hands.

Gas-powered edger? Could he have ruined the mood any more?

Ruby and Weston jumped apart like two junior high kids getting caught kissing behind the school.

Was Gramps trying to mess with Weston’s game?

Weston had gone from putty in the very beautiful hands of Ruby Garza to a stuttering, standoffish fool thanks to Gramps.

Because there had been a feeling between them. Weston saw it in Ruby’s eyes. And no, they hadn’t been kissing, but the electricity between them sizzled like ice water on a pancake griddle.

And to be real, it wasn’t Gramps’s fault. Weston probably would have gone and blown it anyway because there was something about Silver Plum that had him feeling incapable of conveying much of anything in the right way.

Ruby’s eyes went from locked on to Weston’s to closed off, like she had regrets.

“Let’s see this edger,” she said, her eyes looking way too alert for lawn equipment. “I’m pretty confident I can use *this* kind of machinery.”

Gramps made eye contact with Weston when Ruby reached for the edger—a pointed look that seemed to say *I know what you’re aiming at, son.*

Gramps seemed pleased as punch. Whether that was because he'd barged in so unceremoniously or whether he was glad there was something between his grandson and Ruby remained unseen.

Weston fed and watered the horses, talking to each one as he approached them, placing both hands on their shoulder. There were eight of them at the ranch these days—full capacity for the horse barn—and Weston wondered why Gramps hadn't sold any of them.

With all the talk of winding down, Gramps was still keeping the horse aspect of the operation going strong. It didn't make sense. Sometimes Weston wondered if he'd ever have Gramps figured out.

"Hey there, cowboy," Ruby said softly, taking him out of his reverie. She entered the horse barn cautiously, breaching the doorway before looking around, a smile on her face. Her black T-shirt was smudged with dirt and paint.

He walked towards her and bridged the gap that he suddenly hated. "Hey, yourself. How are things going?"

"I had to stop painting the bunkhouse walls for a while because I got a call from work. They had a bunch of questions about Rise Up. I keep thinking things should begin to feel like they're falling into place now, but it's all still a jumbled-up mess."

"The bunkhouse looks great. We're almost done with that."

"I know. I just meant the program as a whole. You think you have every last detail figured out, every last question answered, until you actually get to the point where it's starting to become a reality. Then it feels like the wild wild west."

"Like the Will Smith song?"

"How do you know about that? I would have pegged you as a Merle Haggard fan."

“Always. But good music is good music, period.”

She nodded. “And Will Smith absolutely fits in that good music category.” She smacked her forehead, snapping her eyes closed in thought. “In fact, that’s another thing I need to do. Finalize a playlist for the lessons with the girls. It’s always easier to illustrate a point using a movie clip or song lyrics.”

“I think these girls are some of the luckiest around to get to have this opportunity.”

“I hope so.”

“Do you want to meet the horses?”

Her eyes grew big. “I’d love to. Sadly, I haven’t ridden much since I had to start adulting in the real world a few years ago.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m a rancher. I get to be with horses on a daily basis. It helps with the unavoidable adulting thing.”

Weston introduced Ruby to each one, and they carefully placed a hand on the horses’ neck. By the fourth, Ruby clutched his arm and laughed. “Who named them? It’s like someone took a top ten list of most popular baby girl names from the 1920s.”

Weston’s breathing hitched at her touch. “You don’t like their names?”

“I love them. I just never met horses named Mildred, Betty, Frances, or Florence before.”

“That’s Flo to you, now.” He gestured toward the next two. “And what about Gladys or Gertrude? Or have you ever met a horse named Fanny?”

Ruby giggled. “They’re all just beautiful.” She reached the back of her hand out so Gertrude could tap it with her nose. “The horses and their names.”

“The vintage names thing started with Grandma, who knows when. And Gramps has kept up the tradition.”

“The name Louise is vintage,” Ruby pointed out.

Weston's mind turned over a thought of Grandma, of her courage and ferocity. Yet she was as gentle as a lamb when she needed to be. He was beginning to see why Ruby reminded Gramps of her.

"It is, but so are Brunhilda and Dorcas," Weston joked.

"My personal favorite is Buford, although that's probably a man's name."

She giggled after that last one, and for some reason, to Weston, the sound of her giggling at her own joke was enough to do him in.

He challenged her with his eyes. The other day, in the bunkhouse, they'd been interrupted by Gramps. Something more might have happened if they hadn't been. Would he have kissed her? Would she have kissed him?

"I'll have to name our next horse Bufordette." He picked up a piece of her hair and slid his thumb down it, marveling at how slick and soft it was. No wonder it didn't ever stay put in a ponytail or clip; it was too thick and smooth. He wasn't sure why he was doing it or what would happen next, but for that moment, holding a lock of her hair was all that mattered.

She shuddered, glancing down at his hand, and then back up to his gaze. "Tell me a little bit about each of their temperaments. I told our equine-assisted therapist I'd give her some notes on that before she comes over from Meridian next week."

"I wasn't aware a therapist was coming." Weston took one last run of his thumb along her hair and unwound it from his grasp.

She let out a breath. "Well, yes. I mentioned we'd be involving one in the process. The equine-assisted therapy is going to be a big part of how these girls begin their healing processes. And though I've assisted in a few outpatient programs like that, this is a whole other beast."

"No pun intended?" He pointed to Mildred, a black mare, the largest of the group.

She laughed and glanced down at her hair, sliding her hand down it to smooth her already perfectly smooth hair.

“What is equine therapy supposed to do?” he asked.

“There’s a lot to it, but basically, it boils down to creating trust, learning how to get along, learning emotion regulation like how to become calm and peaceful in a stressful situation, creating a cooperative atmosphere ... and a lot more.”

“Sounds like something I could use.”

She lifted her shoulders. “If you ride horses regularly, you’re probably already learning these things without necessarily knowing it.”

“That will be really good for the kids.” He hesitated. “So, who else is going to come by?” Weston crossed his arms over his chest, both to make sure he didn’t reach for her hair again and because a feeling of unease was brewing. Just because he saw Ruby’s program as a good way to help Gramps understand the ranch still had a lot of life and purpose left in it didn’t mean he wanted to be left out of the loop of what was going on.

“Well, we have funds to bring in some tables and chairs in one of the back bedrooms. You know the one that opens onto a deck? So, the delivery man will be coming with that—but not for a few more weeks.” Ruby bit her bottom lip, her eyes scanning above his head in thought. “Magda, my supervisor, is supposed to come in once before the program starts and then a few times during the program. She has to fill out time assessment forms to make sure we’re fulfilling all the requirements the foundation docs have on them. Oh, and a couple of inspectors need to come in and see if it passes inspection. That should be just a couple of weeks before the program starts. That way, we’ll have time to make any changes if needed.”

Inspection? Changes?

Weston sighed. “That’s a lot. Can I help with anything?”

He wanted to help her. He really did. He also had a lot he needed to do to get the ranch even operational again, let alone

thriving and growing.

She eyed him carefully. “How about we sit down together? More of a formal meeting, and we can discuss everything. We need to be on the same page.”

“Sure, that sounds good. It would be helpful to pass along the information to Gramps and to coordinate the ranch’s schedule with yours.”

“I think I could come after work on Monday. Or after a baseball game. I get to go see one of the kids from the Center play.” She grinned. “And I can’t leave without seeing Edgar score a homer in the seventh like he keeps promising me he will.”

“That’s specific of him.”

“He’s obsessed with baseball. I wouldn’t be surprised if he actually did hit a homer in the seventh.”

“How about, instead of driving all the way out here on Monday night, we meet up for dinner there in town?”

She chewed her lower lip, and Weston could see the wheels turning in her head. Was she wondering if this would constitute a date? The line between business and pleasure was quickly eroding into very confusing territory, and Weston knew it. But the drive to see her Monday night overpowered anything else.

“Clucky Spud at 7:30?” she asked. She bit her nail, almost like she was cringing, unsure if she even wanted him to say yes.

He nodded, and she turned to leave, her apple scent hitting his nostrils. Heaven help him. The horse barn had never smelled even remotely like this.

“You sure you don’t want McDonald’s?” he said with a laugh.

The corners of her lips turned up. “Tempting, but ... you wouldn’t want to see me engage in my secret little habit.”

She was the one who was tempting. And why did he want to engage with her in any and all of her secret little habits,

whatever they were?

Chapter Thirteen

Sunday morning went by in a slog. Ruby went to church, half wishing she'd see Weston there. She'd never seen Earl Wade at their church, but the way Weston talked about God had her wondering if he'd come.

During the sermon, she only looked back over the congregation once. Okay maybe twice, just to be sure. A woman had to be prepared for these things.

He wasn't there, and she was annoyed for feeling disappointed about that.

She taught her Sunday School class, a group of busy ten-year-olds, and then joined the caravan of Garza family cars back to her parents' house. They ate green posole while her parents nitpicked at each other.

"Your papa didn't season this right," Mama grumbled at the table, getting up to add some more spices to the stew pot.

"Your mama's spices are a mess. I couldn't find anything in there," Papa said, shaking his head.

That was how it was every Sunday. It frustrated Ruby, but her parents still loved each other. They just sometimes didn't show it in the best ways.

She spent the rest of the afternoon sleeping on the couch down in the basement, playing with her three nephews, and pulling out her old Los Lonely Boys CDs.

As the family was getting ready to go before nightfall, she thought, for the thousandth time, how different things could have been for them. Seeing her dad's clear face and mind

sometimes undid her. Had her father chosen to stay in his addiction to alcohol, would they have had to go to the Women and Children's Center themselves? She knew the darkness and fear that clouded over the people there. She herself had felt the desperation. Sometimes their new life, the one that had begun when she was the same age as her Sunday School students, still felt like it was all pretend. That they were imposters, play-acting at this thing her college textbooks called a secure family unit.

Monday was a dizzying display of humanity, mixed in with a lot of paperwork. As much as she wanted to work on Rise Up stuff throughout the day, she knew she couldn't. Magda had made it very clear at the beginning of all of this that she was to work on it on her own time, not the government's.

But that didn't stop her mind from going there, especially by her 3:00 p.m. slump, when her eyelids started being mean girls and fighting to close. By then, she'd lost her ability to control her mind from traveling over her recent encounters with Weston. That tall drink of water was too much. Too handsome. Too smart. Too genuine.

And later, at Edgar's baseball game, in between hoots and hollers to cheer him and his teammates to victory, the nerves and excitement of her dinner with Weston made time drag. But when the game ended and she walked to her car, she wasn't sure she was ready and wondered if she should just tell him she'd had a change of plans.

She was falling so quickly, so hard. She'd wanted to find love, she had for a while now. Her friends falling in love, getting married, and starting families had worn on her. She had decided that was what she wanted, and she felt ready for it, even while the dates she'd been on since that decision had been lackluster at best and downright creepy at worst.

But what about Weston? This was starting to feel like it could grow into something real. And getting so close to having

Rise Up actually coming to fruition brought up all sorts of feelings about the past.

Back two years ago, when she was preparing for motherhood, wholly, with everything she had, believing she was being asked by God to do this, she'd felt she was finally walking into her true calling.

Until she wasn't.

And suddenly, that version of imposter syndrome was knocking on her door, too. Who was she to think she could have raised that sweet baby? Who was she to have felt ready or worthy or good enough? Who was she to have thought God was steering her all along, when He so clearly hadn't been?

Ruby made a last-minute decision to go home and change into something less social worker and more woman, and arrived at the restaurant a few minutes late.

When she went inside, she realized they had the restaurant to themselves. He'd already been seated and was sipping from a glass as she walked in. His eyes grew wide when he saw her.

He stood and pulled her chair out for her. "Ma'am. You look incredible."

"Thanks. But Ma'am?" she asked with some snark. "Since when do you call me Ma'am? It makes me think you think I'm older than you."

"No, that's just manners." He blushed. "But I won't if you don't like it."

His hand hovered over the small of her back for a second as he gestured to the chair. She felt the heat from him and wondered again if this was a bad idea. It was probably a very bad idea. "How about just Ruby?"

They sat, and she took a drink of ice water. The black pantsuit she'd changed into might have been a bad choice; it was already feeling too tight around the middle. How would it feel after a Clucky Spud meal?

She would cross that land of discomfort when she got to it. "Or you could always go for the nickname my KNO friends

gave me when we were younger: Rubik's Cube."

Weston laughed. "Ruby Rubik's Cube?"

"That's right." She lifted a shoulder. "It made sense back then."

"You come here every month with them, huh? How long has that been going on?"

"Since early high school. It ended up that there were always two or three of us still here in Silver Plum at any given time during the college years. Some of us delayed college for a gap year or two. Some of us went to school online. Mabel graduated from college early. And now that we're all back, it's still going as strong as ever."

"It's great that you have a good group of friends."

"They *are* great. And just so you know, they all had dumb nicknames for a while there, too. Zane was Dante because he used to have a temper as hot as Dante's Inferno." She giggled. "We had to read it in high school, so that's where we got the idea. And then, let's see. Tory was called Prez long before she was actually student body president. Let's just say she's had it in her from birth. Her husband, Liam, was called Munchie for a while. And no, he didn't have the munchies due to a weed-smoking habit. We all pretty much avoided things like that." She knit her brow together. "I don't remember why we called him Munchie. But I do remember that Anjali was called Jolly as an ironic joke because there was a time there when she was anything but jolly. Harmless teenage angst stuff, but still." Ruby sucked in a breath and shook her head. "She hated it. And then Mack was called lots of things. Macky Mack. Sugar. Footsie. They all have a story, but trust me, you don't want to know. Oh, and Hannah's nickname was Bob, as in Hannah Hannah Bobannah."

"Wow. You guys are weird." He leaned back in his chair to take her in.

"Aren't all teens weird? These are all past nicknames, just so you know. They're rarely used now." She traced a line of condensation on her glass. "Tell me about your friends."

“Ranch life can be isolating. The ranch hands have been my friends, mostly. And my siblings and I are all still pretty close.”

“Who would you call if it was national donut day and you just had to have one?”

“My sister, Mandy, only because my brother would try to eat mine.”

“Who would you call if it was the zombie apocalypse and you needed someone to start a safe colony with?”

“I don’t know, but definitely a woman. We’d need a way to carry on our seed, you know?”

Ruby rolled her eyes but smiled. She could be convinced to build a colony of humans with him if there were zombies threatening them.

“Who would you call if you got thrown in jail? Who would bail you out?”

A shadow crossed Weston’s face, and he chewed his bottom lip. “That’s a tough one. But probably my friend Lonzo. He worked with me at Tillman Ranch.”

Ruby dropped the line of questioning. Maybe he had been thrown in jail once upon a time. She wasn’t judging. She dealt with a lot of people with criminal records, and she knew that didn’t define them. In fact, recovering substance abusers, even those who’d been court-ordered to enter treatment, were some of her favorite people. They were often open, honest, and willing to be vulnerable.

But still, it bothered her that it bothered Weston. She could look him up in her database at work. She didn’t make it a habit, but once or twice before a date, especially a blind date, she looked up a guy. So what? She needed to protect herself.

Her heart thrummed. What was Weston hiding?

Before she could spin on that thought for too long, Dellynn came to take their orders.

Weston glanced down at the menu. “I’ve had the chicken tenders before, and they were fantastic, but I think I’ll go for

the Get Yo' Man Chicken." He said it in a silly accent, like he was from the South.

Ruby nearly sprayed water all over. She covered her mouth and swallowed just in time for another chortle to come out. "Can you try not to do that while I'm taking a drink?"

"What's the fun in that?" Weston teased. "Besides, I was just reading the menu."

She grabbed the vinyl-covered menu from him. "What? Dellynn, is this a new menu item? I've never seen it before."

"Honey, we just changed the name. It's the same thing as Baby Maker Chicken, you know? With the mushrooms, creamy sauce, and bacon? We decided to change it after we got a few complaints from some of the old-timers around here."

"There you go again, being inappropriate with your menu items."

Dellynn turned pink. "It was a typo! It wasn't intentional. We fixed it right away."

"I'm just giving you a hard time. I'll have the chicken noodle soup and a scone, please?"

After Dellynn left with their orders, Weston cocked his head. "So?"

"What?"

"You can't just leave it at that," Weston said. "You've got to tell me about the inappropriate typo."

She considered her options. Weston was a gentleman. Would he think it was funny? Or crass?

"I'll just say one thing. It has to do with a certain female body part."

His eyes widened. "Wow."

"I won't say any more. You can just imagine from there." She did a face palm. "Or don't imagine it! It was bad. But a little bit funny."

He broke down in guffaws. When he'd sufficiently recovered, he whispered in between sips of water, "I think you've just earned a gold star." He held his hands up. "High five. I've never laughed this much on a date before."

She met his high five smack on his palm, and almost by instinct, they curled their fingers to grip each other's hands. With their elbows rested on the table, Ruby's heart pounded in her hand. She was sure he could feel her pulse through her fingertips. His gaze was on hers, steady, unafraid.

"You have nice hands," he said.

"So do you."

"Mine aren't hand-holding ready." He twisted their hands, so he could better see the back of his. "They're messed up, and I'll blame the cows for it. Well, and the hammers and the equipment that breaks down and ..."

"But I like it." She studied her hand in his. Her golden tan skin and natural, pink nails against his sun-darkened hand.

They sat there like that a moment more until Dellynn brought them an appetizer, then they broke apart. Why she felt embarrassed, she didn't know. It might have had something to do with the possibility that Dellynn might say something to someone, and gossip in a small town spreads like wildfire. "We didn't order this," Ruby said.

"I know that." She glanced around the dining room. "But as you can see, people aren't knocking down our door right now. We need to get rid of some of the food Delloyd's prepared."

"Thanks," both Ruby and Weston replied.

Weston dug right into the saucy boneless wing bites, spearing one with a fork and offering it to her.

"Dip that in blue cheese, and then we'll talk," Ruby said. The electricity between them was popping. It had been like that the past several times they'd seen each other. And with that thrill came a sense of calm inside of her. She felt she could be herself. Both her quiet, unsure self mixed with a hush

of “who cares?” It was intoxicating. This thing between them was intoxicating.

And it felt like Weston was feeling the same way. Every time she commented with some sass, he grinned, his green eyes shimmering.

They talked some more about their pasts, and when he asked Ruby her most embarrassing moment, her cheeks grew warm.

“I don’t suppose you’ll take the answer of, it’s too embarrassing to talk about?”

“No. That would be a big fat nope. Tell me.” He’d leaned on his elbows closer to her, the appetizer plate the only thing between them. He lifted the plate and set it on the table behind them, then whirled around to face her again, this time closer, his chin on his fist. With anyone else, it might have looked childish. On him, it looked sexy, with all of his attention on her.

“Fine. I’ll tell you one from childhood. I was at a rodeo—”

“I already like where this is going,” he said.

“And I was back behind the bleachers because it was in between events. My cousins and siblings were running around, getting into trouble, wreaking havoc because it was just so dang hot. You know a bunch of bored, hot kids at a rodeo can’t ever be a good thing.”

He nodded. “What did you do?”

“Well, I stuck a wad of gum on the sole of a guy’s shoe. You know, because we were down below the bleachers and sometimes, especially if people had really big feet, you can access the toes and heels of their shoes, and I just had this huge wad of bubblegum in my mouth.”

“Ruby, I wouldn’t have pegged you for a little devil child.”

“I know, I know. Well, I was dared to do it by my older cousin, Monica.” She said her name with a faint Spanish accent. “And I wanted to fit in. Monica was always so mean, and I was trying to get on her good side. So, I did, and the

poor guy.” She shook her head. “We watched that gum melt on the toe of his shoe and every time he’d shift his feet or stand up, the gum kept getting smeared everywhere.”

She took a deep breath and continued. “I grew a conscience suddenly and went to leave to go sit with my parents. Monica followed us and told my parents what I’d done, but of course, she didn’t tell them she’d dared me. We sat there arguing, and I think my parents were just like, quiet down, you little mugre.”

She laughed, but then grew sober. “Eventually, we went back down under the bleachers, and I shoved Monica for lying to my parents about it. And she shoved back. And pretty soon we were on the ground, and the other cousins got into it, calling ‘fight, fight, fight!’”

“That sounds wild. I can’t picture you doing that.”

“It was so embarrassing.” Ruby still couldn’t tell this story without the shame bubbling up inside of her.

Dellynn brought their entrees out, and Ruby was so blinded by the deliciousness that she changed the subject.

As they finished up their food, Weston stared at her like he was having a lightbulb moment. “Excuse me a moment,” he said as he stood.

She watched him walk over to the jukebox. What was he planning now? A moment later, a soft Tim McGraw song piped through the speakers. He walked to her, and his walk had a swagger, slow and steady.

But it was his face. That’s what got to her. His face, so full of passion, with a touch of vulnerability around the edges. That’s what did her in. The vulnerability of walking over to her to ask her to dance.

He didn’t ask, not verbally. But everything in his body language and face gave way to the pleading of his open hand.

She took his waiting hand and slid out of her chair, following as he led her to the middle. Dellynn and Delloyd had arranged it that way ever since Ruby could remember, so

people could enjoy a dance. The space was only big enough for one couple. But that's all they needed.

Weston slid one hand around her waist, then cradled her other hand close to his chest. She felt the length of him against her, close enough to feel the heat.

He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Is this okay?" the way he spoke so softly peeled back the hardened husk around her heart, little by little.

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She only nodded.

Her knees didn't actually start to weaken until he began to sing in her ear. Weston Wade had been keeping a secret, and she was awash in sensation. He was a phenomenal singer. He had a voice that melted her down into nothing but a puddle of pent-up longing.

And she never wanted to let him go.

Chapter Fourteen

The air in the room had been filled up with something different, an extra sense. Something big, expansive. Like she had one of those oxygen masks on that give you a little boost of energy.

As they danced, she was more alive than ever before. He led her like an expert, his boots softly clicking on the tile floor of the Clucky Spud.

His voice was deep, he could have sung bass in any choir. Goosebumps formed along her neck as he sang the words. He kneaded the back of her thumb with his own, slowly, slowly, slowly, at half time to the music. Just when she didn't think she could take it anymore, he wheeled her out into a spin, deftly catching her in his left arm as he dipped her slightly.

What? The song was over? Was it just a sample?

“Weston,” she breathed, but it felt more like a question than anything else.

He pulled her close one more second, and then without another word, he led her off the dance floor and to their table.

“Would you like some dessert?” His eyes briefly met hers before darting to the little dessert menu between them.

The biggest, best dessert in the world could never be better than what they'd just experienced. But she wouldn't pass up the chance for a brownie. “They have gigantic brownies here that are incredible.” Her voice still sounded small from what had just happened. She placed her hands on her burning cheeks before putting them in her lap and taking a deep breath.

“Weston, I had no idea you could sing or dance like that.” This time, she sounded a little more like herself.

He only lifted a shoulder, studying the dessert menu like it held war secrets from all the foreign nations combined. He worked his mouth around silent words, then finally met her gaze. She was sure it held wonder, maybe even awe. But she simply did not care.

“I enjoyed that very much.” He cleared his throat and pushed his chair back a little. “You were easy to lead. Nice to dance with.” After another pause, he leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. The very arms that had led her through the hottest dance of her life. She should focus on his arms instead of the way she’d felt when he sang in her ear.

“Have you sung in any choirs before? Or bands or something? You sound like a mix of Walker Hayes and Garth Brooks.” She couldn’t tell him that the urgency in his voice, the pleading way he’d sung the lyrics, was mesmerizing.

If she’d entertained thoughts of a future with Weston Wade before, that was chump change compared to now. She’d been a kindergartener, having her first crush on the kid who helped pass out the graham crackers and milk. But this. This was real—the most real she’d ever felt.

Weston was all she’d wanted in a man. He was the kind of man who had things all figured out. He knew what he wanted, and he worked his tail off for it.

She wanted him to want *her*.

His neck flushed above his flannel collar. “No. I’ve never done anything like that. My sister’s the singer. We went to many choir concerts for her when she was in school. But that wasn’t my thing.”

“I think it needs to be your thing.” Once she said that, she realized it sounded a little bossy. “I mean, if you ever wanted to sing for an audience on a stage, I think you could kill it.”

His gaze dropped, and he blinked slowly. He wasn’t buying it. He didn’t want to take the compliment. “I love music, but I do not love singing in front of people.”

“I’m a person, and you sang in front of me just fine.”

“That’s different. You’re different.” He slid his hand across the table and grabbed hers, echoing the slow way he’d rubbed his thumb across hers like before. He shook his head. “I got a little carried away. I sort of ... lost my head a little. I know how you feel about dating, and I sort of forgot all that for a moment.”

She shook her head. “It’s more complicated than that. I want to. I want to have a serious relationship and get married someday, I really do. It’s just that I have seen the wreckage that love has caused in so many people’s lives. I’ve seen and experienced it every day. And so not only am I terrified to take that risk for myself, I don’t think I have it in me after what I’ve seen. I don’t think I’m capable.”

“Capable of what?” His voice was soft, his eyes searching.

“You’re going to make me say it? It’s embarrassing.”

He just sat there, his face open and kind, waiting.

“I don’t think I’m capable of loving someone after what I’ve seen in my line of work. What I see every day. I see what giving your heart and your trust to another person can do. And I can’t do that. At least not for a long time. I mean, I have hope that one day I can. It’s just that it would be unfair to anyone ...” She gazed at him, both conviction and torture behind her words. “It would be unfair of you to ask you to enter into something deep between us when I’m not ready.”

“I’m not ready either. But what I felt back there.” Weston stuck a thumb behind him and glanced back at the tiny spot on the floor where they’d danced. The way his eyes took in the now empty scene ... it was as if he were reliving it, and Ruby’s own body flushed as she did the same.

“What I felt back there, from you and me both, was enough to want to try. I want to date you, Ruby.”

A giggle bubbled up in her. “I like a man who can be direct.”

He leaned back and surveyed her, and even the way he brushed his fingertips across his arm to scratch at it was

attractive.

Oh no, Ruby. What have you done? You are so far gone so fast that even the way he scratches his arm sends you into a dizzy fit?

“I guess I don’t know what I’m asking. I just—” His gaze was pleading, raw, honest.

“You’re asking if we can go on a date, and I think yes.”

“So, what’s this? It’s not a date?”

“It was supposed to be a business meeting. A ‘let’s get on the same page about the program and the resurrection of the ranch’ meeting.” She teased him with a smile. It had turned into so much more. It was scary how quickly things could shift.

But then she realized that, no, it didn’t happen for her just now. Yeah, the singing and dancing totally sent her plunging over the waterfall, head first into bubbling rough waters and the thrill of a lifetime. But this had been brewing for a while. If she could be honest with herself, her innocent little “This guy is amazing” had turned into “This guy is everything I want and more” weeks before.

“That didn’t really happen, did it?” He gave a sheepish grin and then ducked his head. “Ruby, if you would accompany me on a real date this Friday night, I would be honored. If it’s anything like our not-a-date has been, I’m in for a very nice time.”

A crowd of people burst into the restaurant, and a cacophony of talking and movement ensued. Ruby recognized several people as locals, the former high school secretary, Leslie Palmer, was there with her husband and people who were no doubt related in some way, shape, or form. That was usually how Silver Plum rolled.

Weston asked Dellynn for the check, and she already had it in hand. When she passed the slip to Weston, she gave Ruby a pointed look. Ruby knew that look. It was Dellynn’s way of asking if she was okay. If everything was alright. An unspoken

code. Dellynn had been watching over the teens and young adults in Silver Plum for a very long time.

Ruby's only response was a slight nod of the head and a smile that she tried to tamp down. Dellynn got the picture and raised her brows as if to say, "If you're sure you're sure, then I'm happy for you."

Weston left some bills on the table, and they stepped out into the night air. Things had suddenly gotten stuffy and loud in the Clucky Spud, and Ruby was glad to be free of it.

"Thank goodness they didn't come any earlier."

"Yeah," Weston agreed, his voice gravelly. Maybe he was thinking what she was thinking: that the time they'd spent on the dance floor was somehow sacred, and thank goodness they hadn't interrupted that.

"Oh, but you didn't get any dessert," Ruby said. "And our business meeting will have to be rescheduled."

"I certainly don't mind that." Weston flashed a grin at her. "At all."

"Um, tomorrow night at the ranch? I'll come by after work, and we could talk about the plans for the program and the ranch."

"I'd love that. And Friday night?"

"I'll be there," she said.

"I'm coming to pick you up, Ruby. This is going to be an official and proper date."

And before she could say anything more, he grabbed her hand and they walked in silence to her car. Of course, he opened it for her, and of course, he asked her if she had enough fuel to get home and if she needed anything else.

It felt nice to be fussed over. It felt nice to be on the receiving end of care and concern, something she often didn't feel as a social worker.

If she wasn't careful, she'd somehow let Weston Wade take care of her for real, for a very long time.

Chapter Fifteen

Weston finished vacuuming the den floor just in time to notice that the blooms he'd cut from Grandma's hydrangea bushes out front were in a too-small vase. He glided the vacuum down to the hall closet, shoved it in, not bothering to wind the cord, then continued on to the kitchen, throwing open cabinet doors wildly. "Gramps!" he shouted, "Where are the vases?"

There was no answer, so he continued throwing open cabinets. He wiped his forehead off on the sleeve of his cotton T-shirt, not an easy task since they were short sleeves. But it would have to do since there wasn't time for him to go find a tissue to wipe up the sweat that was now pooling on his forehead like he was running the Ragnar.

"Can we turn on the AC yet, Gramps? This place is boiling."

Gramps had a rule that he wouldn't run the AC unit in the house until June 1. It didn't matter if it reached 100 degrees before then; he never budged on this rule. Even Grandma used to complain about the constant dance of opening and closing windows and blinds all day just to get the right flux of temperature in the house.

If Gramps didn't seem to care whatsoever about Weston's dire need for a new vase, the threat of someone fiddling with his AC controls had him coming out of some far recess of the house.

He didn't take two steps into the kitchen before his rich chuckle echoed across the room. "What do we have here?" He

looked at Weston with a bemused smile.

“Not helpful.” Weston shot a glance at his grandfather and then left the kitchen to try the linen closet. That didn’t make any sense to Weston, but the house had never been the same since Grandma died, and maybe Gramps had somehow decided to start keeping the vases in there.

Gramps followed him down the hall. “You need some clean sheets, Wes? Is that why you’re upset?”

“I’m not upset. And no, I don’t need clean sheets.” He ran a hand along the back of his neck, which was surprisingly not perspiring. Yet. It was probably only a matter of time. Weston closed the linen closet door after not finding anything even remotely like a vase.

“Will you just tell me what you’re looking for?” Gramps grumbled. Oh great. Now both Wade men were on edge. This was not good.

“A vase. Where are Grandma’s vases?”

“Oh, ah, I saw one in the den.”

“Not that one. I need a bigger one. Grandma had all kinds of vases because you were a good husband to her and brought her lots of flowers over the years. So where are they?”

Gramps sighed. “Honestly? I don’t think there are any here. Your aunt Lana has some of them, and the others I gave to Goodwill.”

Weston wheeled around. “Goodwill? Would Grandma have wanted that?”

“Uh, I never asked her, Wes, and she never told me. But I think where she’s at, there’s little concern for vases.”

“I didn’t realize you were getting rid of her stuff.” Weston thumbed his nose and scratched above his eye. “Do you have anything that will work as a vase? I’m on a time crunch.”

“Is Ruby coming over?”

“Yes, she’s coming over.”

As Gramps's eyes danced, Wes sighed. "It's not like that. We're having a business meeting."

"Since when have you needed vases for ranch meetings?"

"Again, not helpful." He felt bad for being so abrupt with Gramps. He really did. But if he'd just turned on the AC on a hot day like every other normal person, he wouldn't be so overheated. And if he weren't about to internally combust, he could think things through more rationally.

The doorbell rang, and Weston cursed Ruby's timeliness. Why couldn't she be the kind of woman who arrives fashionably late?

His last thoughts before he opened the door were that he should have changed his shirt in case there were sweat moons in the armpit region, and then thank goodness Ruby couldn't read his mind. At least he hoped she couldn't.

Gramps stood right behind Weston as the door was opened, and Ruby acknowledged him first. "Hello, Earl. How are you? Oh, and nice sunset you have here."

"Oh, that old thing?" Gramps answered heartily, swiping at the air with his paw of a hand. "Glad you like it."

A smile curled Ruby's lips. "You really outdid yourself this time. Can I order more of those when the girls get here?"

Weston stiffened at her mention of the program. His own approach was more of an "avoid the subject and no one gets hurt" mentality. Immature? Yes. Effective at curbing Gramps's disdain and worry, thus avoiding the possibility that he'd shut the whole thing down? Also yes.

And that was how Weston was handling the revitalization of the ranch, too. So far, it was working perfectly. No harm. No foul.

Ruby stepped through the threshold, finally turning her gaze to Weston. He ate it up like a starved stray kitten on a bowl of cream.

"Hi, Weston." She took in a deep breath. "It smells like cookies in here."

“It’s—” Weston hesitated, willing himself to not go to some ridiculous place of shame for lighting a stupid candle instead of baking her cookies.

“It’s Eu de Lemon Sugar Cookie scent, unfortunately. Not actual cookies. Tried to talk him into making cookies, but he refused,” Gramps chided.

“You never said anything like that.” Weston motioned to the hall. He turned to Ruby. “I thought we’d have the meeting in the sitting room. It’s quieter than the den.”

And farther away from Gramps, hopefully. Where was his need for Westerns and a bowl of ice cream now?

“I love scented candles. I have a hefty collection. But I don’t have Lemon Sugar Cookie. It’s very nice.”

Weston hoped she wasn’t thinking he was trying too hard.

He totally was. He’d thought of little else since the Clucky Spud. Ruby was in his every thought and need.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” Gramps said before disappearing into his cave. “Let me know what the final decisions are.”

Weston didn’t know whether to feel relief or alarm that Gramps didn’t want to attend the meeting. Mostly relief, to be sure, because then he got to be alone with Ruby. But even just a year or so ago, Gramps would have had every finger in every pie that had anything to do with the ranch.

“Have you recovered from the other night?” she asked. “That Get Yo’ Man Chicken is divine but heavy.”

“Agreed. But I can’t wait to eat it again.” Nerves threatened to make him clumsy, and he scolded himself. “I think I even dreamt about it last night.”

“Oooh. Food dreams are the best. I ate calamari once. I had the strangest, most fantastical dream that night. It was as if Brandon Sanderson and a bunch of his fantasy writer friends were having a party in my brain.”

She giggled again, and his heart soared.

“I love when you laugh at yourself,” he said.

“It’s better than feeling down about myself. Believe me, there’s enough on the job that keeps me in that ... real place, you know?”

“I don’t really know, because my world is cows. The mamas and the babies. That’s my wheelhouse. Throw me in a room of actual people, I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Oh, yes you do.” She fluttered her lashes at him, and it was as if the world tipped sideways for a moment.

When he couldn’t think of anything witty to say to that, he asked her about the upcoming week for the project preparation.

“Thanks. It’s coming along.” She rifled through papers in a notebook, then got out her iPad and a stylus pen. “Magda thought it would be best if the girls were invited to the program individually instead of completing an application. We might have to move that direction in the future, depending on ... things ... but for now, we know plenty who fit the criteria. It’s just a matter of narrowing it down.”

“Right. And that must be hard if you know so many. I mean, how do you choose?”

“Exactly. And it’s not like they’re all in one big room together, and we only pick half, and the others go home without so much as a consolation trophy. None of them even know a thing about the program yet. And many don’t know each other. It’s just hard because we’re essentially asking them not to work or earn money for most of the summer. That’s a big ask. And I think many of the girls wouldn’t see the program as a better investment in their future than the paychecks they’d get this summer working fast food.”

“Although if they did, we could ask them to score you some cheeseburgers. So, there’s one good thing about that.”

Was Weston imagining things, or did she scoot closer to him as she settled back on the cushions of the couch?

She giggled. “Right. Anyway, we’ll figure it out. I’ve got Magda and some

coworkers who would help me narrow it down. I've got to write invitation letters and make it compelling enough that they're going to want to join. I don't have time to do a printed, full-color brochure type of thing, but I can make one digitally using my own camera. So, that's something we need to schedule, too. A few photos of the facilities, the landscape, the horses."

"Sure, come anytime."

They talked for the next hour, scheduling out everything, such as when Weston would be getting a shipment of tools and supplies that he would allow the program to use. He wouldn't need most of them until he'd bring his herd down off the mountain in late fall.

Ruby closed her iPad cover, then stretched her back and arms into the air, yawning.

"Would you like a drink?" Weston asked.

"I would love one."

"Let's go out on the deck. I say that's enough planning for one night."

Once they were on the deck, sitting on low, cushioned deck chairs the color of grass, Ruby sighed. "I feel a lot better about things now that we've hashed it all out."

"Me, too."

They each took a long drink and then trained their sights on the brilliantly clear night sky. "Not a bad view, huh?" Weston asked.

"Is it better than your big sky country?"

"Montana is Big Sky Country, Ruby. I'm from Wyoming."

"Oh yeah." She covered her smile with her hand. "Sometimes states all run together."

"I think probably most people think Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho are all about the same."

"And they couldn't be more wrong. We're all very, very different."

“Yes.” He clanked his bottle against hers. “To Idaho and Wyoming. Two very different but amazing states.”

“Here, here,” Ruby said, taking another swallow.

Weston took another swallow too, but he didn’t taste a thing. The only thing in his head was the wonderment that maybe he could kiss Ruby.

But maybe she’d rather wait for their date on Friday. What knucklehead suggested Friday for their date. Why not tomorrow?

Oh yeah, that knucklehead was him.

It was okay. He could wait. Living and working, breathing, and sweating on a ranch was very good for teaching patience. He had to exercise it every day. The way he saw things, everything about ranch life was a training ground for relationships.

And the possibility of a relationship with Ruby? That was worth waiting for. He already felt like he’d known her before, taken care of her before. It wouldn’t be too much of a problem to wait a little more.

“You going to the Silver Plum rodeo?” Ruby asked lazily, her voice soft and sleepy.

“I can’t turn down a rodeo. When is it?”

“May. Tickets go on sale on the city website here pretty soon. They sell out fast.”

“Isn’t the mayor a friend of yours? He could get us some if we miss out, right?”

“Wrong. Mack would if he could. The rodeo committee is like a team of the nicest vultures you’ll ever meet. They’ll kill you with kindness, and no one gets a free pass.”

He laughed, and it felt good. All of this felt very good.

“Are you sure you want to go to a rodeo, though?” he asked. “They seem to bring out the wild animal in you. Getting in fights. Vandalizing someone’s shoes.”

“You’d like to see that, wouldn’t you? Me becoming a wild animal?” She shook her head and finished off her drink. “I’d like to think I’ve matured since the age of twelve.”

“Twelve? I was picturing you like, seven years old. You were way past the age of knowing better.”

She set the bottle down on the deck. “What, like you haven’t made any mistakes in life? Like you haven’t had some selfish, immature moments you wish you could take back?”

His face sobered. “Yes, I have. No question. I don’t even want to talk about some of my teen years. No siree.” He raised a finger. “I did have a good experience at a rodeo once myself.”

“Oh, yeah? Storytime, Weston. Now.”

“Okay, okay. A lot of the details are fuzzy. And I’m sure it’s like a fishing story. It’s gotten taller and more fantastical over time. But I was at a rodeo once. In the Midwest. And I saved a girl there. She was being beaten up by a bunch of older girls.”

“Was this your eye incident?”

“Yeah. A punch was thrown, and I was in the wrong place. I managed to get the older girl off the younger one. And, I don’t know. It felt good, that even though I was not a great person, to do something that meant something. Something noble.”

A warm smile spread across Ruby’s face, the moonlight in the clear, country sky illuminating the intriguing planes of her face.

He wanted more than anything to kiss her. In his mind, he’d planned to explore that idea on their date on Friday. There was something respectful about waiting until they were in a classy situation before kissing her for the first time. He was a gentleman by upbringing and hardwiring, and he wanted to start out like he planned to go on: respecting and cherishing Ruby at every turn.

But when he stood and stretched out his hand to pull her close to him, she stood and looked at him with such

fascination and care. His heart started to thrum, fighting against his lungs and ribcage. Did she want to kiss him? Now?

Her lips parted, and she sighed, bringing her hand up to his hair and sliding her nails softly along his hairline on his temple.

The movement undid him, and suddenly he found himself kissing the socks off Ruby Garza.

Chapter Sixteen

For such an ordinary country night under the stars, Ruby was having an extraordinary, unbelievably romantic experience.

Kissing Weston was like ... she couldn't think of any words as his mouth took over hers with a cautious pressure. It was clear that he wanted this. She felt wanted, needed, and adored as he gently but confidently explored her mouth with his own.

His hands settled around her waist, and that thrill translated into even more segmented flashes in her mind. His lips, firm and loving, his hands, almost like they were holding on for dear life and anchoring to her waist, the length of his legs down her own.

Far too quickly, he broke apart. His breaths came in rapidly, and his eyes were fierce. "I'm ... I'm sorry." He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth.

She leaned in closer to him. "What are you sorry for?" A dash of disappointment threatened her sense of safety and bliss. Did he not want his?

"I wasn't going to do that tonight."

"Well, I wanted it, and I thought you did, too."

"I did ... I do. But I wanted to wait and see how things felt on our date on Friday." He pulled her close, his breathing slowing and his lips curling into a smile. "I do want this. Too much. I have to rein it in."

She felt the truth behind his words. His stopping wasn't because he didn't want her.

She rested her cheek against his chest. Man, he was tall. The perfect height and build. Strong, lean, safe.

A shudder tore through her as she wanted to continue kissing him.

“Are you cold?” he asked softly.

She nodded. The shiver was both temperature and desire-induced, she reasoned. He held her a little tighter, squeezing her waist possessively.

Have mercy.

If he wanted to wait to kiss again on Friday, then she could wait. It would be difficult, but she could do it.

Self-control was a strong trait of hers, after all. She could control herself in her job, when she was in court testifying against a deadbeat dad who wanted custody. She could control herself when she pushed herself to exercise when she'd rather eat a microwavable burrito and watch old episodes of *Community*. She could control herself when memories of the child she'd almost gotten to mother threatened to undo her.

If she could control herself in those moments, she could do so now.

“I need to go,” she said. “I'll stop by on Thursday after the inspector from the state comes. It's coming along. Lots to do ...” She trailed off, then stretched up to her tiptoes to kiss him again softly. Again, it was like her world had shifted into something meaningful.

“Goodnight, Weston. Can't wait for Friday.”

And in a haze, she drove back home, grinning and content. Warmer than she should have been on a cool, spring Silver Plum night.

When Ruby arrived at Wade Ranch on Thursday right after work, Weston wasn't there. His truck was gone, and Earl confirmed that Weston had gone up to the grazing site on the mountain and wasn't expected home until nightfall.

Earl invited her in and said she could work anywhere she wanted. She headed for the kitchen table and set up shop. She pulled up the initial inspection report on her laptop and read through it, dreading every line that told her something was out of place or not up to code. She had a lot of work ahead of her. The final inspection was in a few weeks, and there was still an alarming number of things to get done.

Thankfully, she'd figured this would be the case and had dressed down again, this time in a long-sleeved, soft navy T-shirt and a pair of worn-out jeans. They weren't so worn out that they were sloppy, though. The newly washed pair still hugged her curves tight, maybe a little too tight, and she hoped working in them would stretch them out a little more because ... ouch. Too-tight jeans were the worst.

The doorbell rang its quaint, tinny song. Ruby wondered if Louise had picked it and decided she probably had. It sort of said a lot about her if she had.

After a few seconds, it rang again, so she got up to answer it. Earl must have been in the back.

"Hello." The woman on the front porch was tall, and the top half of her black hair was pulled back off her face. She seemed to be in her sixties, and she wore a graceful outfit of brown velveteen pants and a white blouse with a silk brocade kimono -style covering. She glanced behind Ruby and said quietly, "Is Earl home?"

"Uh, I'm not sure. He was earlier."

"Are you," she paused and glanced at a card in her hand. "Ruby Garza?"

"I am," Ruby said. "And you are?"

"I'm Cynthia Hughes. I own the luxury horse arena next door." She raised her nose in the air and sucked in her cheeks.

Ruby had no idea there was a luxury horse arena nearby or what that even was, but she said, “Come on in. I’ll go see if I can find Earl for you.”

Cynthia held up a hand. “No. I actually wanted to speak with you. And it’s a little delicate, so I’ll be brief.”

Ruby’s stomach traveled to her throat. This couldn’t be good.

“I received notice that Wade Ranch is hosting a disadvantaged youth program this summer?”

“Yes,” Ruby said. She let go of the doorknob she just realized she’d still been holding on to. If this woman wanted to come to blows with Ruby about the girls, she was ready.

Cynthia frowned. “I’m disappointed to hear that. My horse arena is world-class. I have premium clients flying in from all over. My products are worth a great deal of money, and I’m afraid my insurance company is not going to like this one bit.”

“I don’t understand how a program for teen girls here would have any effect on you or your business.”

Cynthia’s eyes rolled up, and she took a deep breath. “That’s why I the county sent me a letter. They have an obligation to let the neighbors know about it. It *will* affect me.” She was talking slow, as if she thought Ruby was a child and wouldn’t understand her. “It’s no different than if a prison were going to be built here. There are liabilities, as well as safety and property value issues to consider.”

“Are you comparing my program that helps at-risk girls to a prison?” No, no, no, no. If this woman thought Ruby’s girls were criminals, she’d best be set straight.

“Trust me,” Cynthia said. “I’ve had problems like this in the past. It’s all the same. Well-meaning people bring these kids in, and then bad things happen. I have a brand image to uphold and my property and products to protect.”

“What products? I don’t understand what you sell.” Ruby knew this didn’t really matter, but for now, that’s what her mind had fixated on. Nothing this woman was saying was okay, and Ruby’s mind was trying to sort itself out.

Cynthia glared, her hands curling into fists. “My horses? They’re more expensive than you could ever imagine.” She gave Ruby a look up and down that said, *And I think you’re riffraff.*

“Okay, I’ve never heard of people calling their horses their products, but whatever. Look, these girls are not criminals. They’ve simply been dealt some pretty rough things, and my program will teach them some good coping tools, the value of hard work, and how to trust again by utilizing the healing power of horses. I’m sure you can understand at least the horse part.”

Cynthia waved her away. “I have no interest in having this in my backyard. I’m asking you, civilly and with the utmost respect, to kindly take your program elsewhere.”

Ruby gave a curt nod. “Alright, that’s good to know. We’ll be moving forward with it, but I’ll now be doubly sure to remind the girls to stay far away from your property. You won’t even know we’re here.”

“You’ll *remind* them? I don’t think these girls need reminders. They need a barbed wire, electric fence.”

How dare she say that? Every nerve in Ruby’s body told her to deck this ill-informed and judgmental woman.

“Thanks for stopping by,” Ruby said with an acidic smile before slamming the door in Ms. Cynthia Hughes’ face.

She didn’t smack the woman, but she’d been a caged, starving tiger taunted by its prey. It would have felt so good to swipe a nail-studded paw in her direction.

Ruby’s girls. That’s what she thought of them already, even though she didn’t know them yet. Check that. She *did* know them. She knew of their pain and questions and fears. She knew they had far too many Cynthia Hughes’ in their lives, and it was time to show them how to take back their own power in a healthy way.

Chapter Seventeen

Ruby let out her angry energy on various projects in the bunkhouse. It was almost dark when she heard Weston's truck, which was an automatic signal to her heart to start beating faster. The problem was, her heart had already been a little erratic ever since the neighbor, fancy horse lady goddess, had come by.

She tried to calm her nerves as she continued working on installing the window coverings, prefab shutters in a complementing warm wood that went well with the interior of the bunkhouse.

Finally, Weston opened the door to the bunkhouse, wearing a clean T-shirt and shorts. She'd never seen him dressed like that before—so casual and not work wear.

"Took you long enough to come and say hi," she said, turning back to drilling the shutters into place.

She didn't look over at him, but she felt his eyes on her. She liked knowing he was looking at her, and maybe he was enjoying what he was seeing?

"I've been repairing the fence up at our grazing land. I respect you too much not to shower first before I come to see you."

She glanced at him and saw the way he was looking at her. Oh yes, he liked what he saw. The realization did things to her tummy.

"My nose and I thank you." She tossed him a smile, screwed the other side of the shutter in place, then turned back.

“And my eyes and I thank you, as well.”

She could give him a compliment, couldn't she? She wished he would walk over and kiss her senselessly like the other night, but he seemed bent on waiting until their date on Friday. She liked his traditionalism and sentimentality. That was so much better than the guys she'd gone out with over the last year from that dating app.

But she wouldn't mind if he broke his own rule just a little.

He gazed at her. “My eyes have the advantage tonight.”

How did he manage to look at her that way? Like he was respecting her and also wanting her at the same time.

“Full disclosure? These jeans are a little tight. I've probably been eating my stress over this program a little too much.” She felt her cheeks grow warm. Why was she always doing that? Saying things that no one wanted to hear, especially the guy she had the hots for.

Yep. She went there. She had the hots for Weston. And yes, sometimes her heart felt like she was in seventh grade again, and she, Hannah, and Mabel would talk about who they had the hots for. Tory and Anjali didn't usually talk like that, but the rest of them did.

He walked over to her, his shins long and lean, the calf muscles behind them flexing with every step. He shook his head. “Not too tight. Perfect.”

She shuddered.

“I mean, if they're making you uncomfortable, then that's not good.”

“No.” Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. “That's not what's affecting my breathing right now.” She let a little giggle loose.

He looked like he wanted to ask her what was affecting her breathing, but she knew that he already knew.

Standing in front of her, he placed his hands on either side of her, at her shoulder height, leaning his hands up against the wall behind her for support.

“The shutters look amazing.” But he wasn’t looking at the shutters. He was looking into her eyes, and all sense and reason flitted right out the window next to her.

“They’re easy if you read the directions. Do you read directions, Weston?”

“Do you mean when doing house projects? Or just in general? Because you’re sending me directions with your eyes, Ruby. That maybe you’re looking forward to our date tomorrow?”

“Are those the kind of directions you like to read? The signals from women?”

“Not women. One woman. You.” He trailed a finger down the curve of her cheek.

“You expect me to believe you don’t try to read the signals from other women?” As much as she would love to be able to find out that he never dated, that thought was simply impossible.

“I have in the past, sure. But in ranching life, especially where I lived in Wyoming, there aren’t many women around. None I could see a future with. So I usually didn’t bother dating or reading signals or ...” He chuckled under his breath. “Instructions.”

“Oh,” was all she could squeak out.

“Tell me, Ruby. Do you read the directions coming from men’s gazes? I know you have them left and right, twenty-four seven.”

“I’m a social worker, Weston. I work long hours in the most unglamorous situations.”

“Still haven’t answered my question, though.”

“Maybe we should have discussed this before we kissed.” She didn’t want to glance down at his mouth when she said that, but she totally did, and a wave of pleasure crashed into her at the memories of that mouth on hers.

“What are you saying? That you’ve been entertaining one specific man’s attentions lately?” His expression was

unreadable, but if Ruby had to guess, she'd say it was laced with a feeling of unease.

“If you're asking if I have a boyfriend, the answer is obviously no. I wouldn't have kissed you if I did. Anjali made me get on a dating site last year, so I've been on some dates recently. But never more than once or twice.”

“Just haven't found the right one yet, huh?”

“My friends say I'm picky. I like to say I'm moving forward with the end in mind. If I can't even begin to picture the end with the guy I'm on a date with—” she shrugged.

“He's outta there?”

She grinned. “Exactly.”

He pulled up and away from the wall and took a step back, but his smile was still melting her faster than an ice cream cone in July. “Good to know. I'm glad you'll be direct with me.”

“Can you see a future with me?”

“Whoa. Hold on now. We haven't even been on a date yet.” His words could have been offensive, but they weren't, especially because he grabbed her hand and kissed it softly. He was teasing her, and she couldn't get enough of it.

“That's not what I meant.” Cue her blushing again. “I was just thinking that you and I both want the use of this ranch. If Earl decides to go through with shutting down the ranch, you'll leave and go ranch somewhere else, right?”

“I guess I'll have to.” His gaze turned dark and stormy. “But I'm hoping that getting some cattle up here again will remind him of the glory days. And if I work hard enough, I can prove to him that I won't drop the ball on this.”

She put up a hand, smiling lightly. “I'm in that proving ground, too. I hope he'll let us keep coming back with Rise Up.”

He tugged her closer to him. “I like that thought. Your program here in the summer while my cattle are up in the

highlands. Then my cows here in the winter. Either way, that might mean I'll get to continue seeing you around."

"That seems good to me." She rested her head on his chest, feeling again that he was trustworthy and good. And that she'd always known him. She pulled away and looked up at him. "I need to tell you about a visitor that came today."

"Uh oh."

"Yeah. It's not great. Cynthia Hughes stopped by."

Weston closed his eyes, as if trying to shield himself.

"She said she'd gotten a notice in the mail about Rise Up, and she was concerned about her horses and clients and all the fancy business stuff she has going on."

"I'm not at all surprised. But I'm sorry you had to talk with her."

"It wasn't anything I couldn't handle. But she's very misinformed about the girls and unnecessarily concerned."

For every good-hearted, honest person Ruby met as a social worker, there was usually a narrow-minded and cruel person just around the corner. She didn't want to be jaded and think the worst of people. But when Cynthia Hughes mentioned barbed wire fences, all good sense in Ruby went offline. It was a good thing she slammed that door when she did, or Weston might have had to bail her out of jail for assault.

"You know, Cynthia used to be a lot nicer." Weston folded his arms across his chest. "But she lost her husband, and then suddenly it was like she was just upset all the time. If there's something to complain about, she will."

"I just hope nothing happens to continue her biases against the girls. She was talking about them like they're criminals." Sadness crept into her, as stealthy as a whiff of hunger.

"I'll talk to her," Weston said, his jaw set.

"No. I don't think that's necessary. I hope she just needed to be heard and that she can move on with her life now. I understand how hardships change people."

“Tell me more,” Weston said, his eyes riveted on her.

She stared at the floor while her foot made circles along the wood. “The kind of work I do—it changes a person. It’s changed me for good in many ways. But I’m also more jaded.”

“I’m sorry for the pain and stress. For all you witness in your work.”

“I’m learning how to deal with it. But then sometimes it becomes very personal.”

“Like with the baby two years ago?”

She lifted her head up. “This got serious real fast.” She gave a nervous laugh.

But he pulled her into another hug. “I’m just so sorry that happened. I know that’s impacted you in a lot of ways. Anyone in your position would have had a really difficult time with it.”

“It’s contributed to my keeping people at arm’s length, that’s for sure.”

“I have my own things ...” he said. “...My own reasons for keeping people at arm’s length.”

“Talk to me. You know about Chantel and her baby. I want to know you better.”

He gazed at her, his deep green eyes sporting gray tones in the waning light. “I will. But right now, we have work to do.” He broke apart from the hug and began working on the shades.

And as she watched him, for a brief moment, there was no fear. No feeling less than. No scars from the horrors she’d seen. It was just the two of them, there on the ranch, companions in every way.

And it felt good.

Chapter Eighteen

Ruby and Weston's date was everything she hadn't expected. First, when he picked her up from her apartment at six on the dot, he brought her a grease-spotted bag of McDonald's cheeseburgers.

"How? Where did you get these? And how are they still warm?"

"A gentleman never tells," he chided her with a grin. "But you better eat them quickly before they get cold."

They pulled over to the city park, skipped the picnic tables and stage, and instead sat on the swings. They dug into the cheeseburgers, their elbows hooked around the chains on the seats.

Ruby liked watching him eat. She'd discovered that at the Clucky Spud. You could tell a lot about a man by how he ate. There were the scarfers, the ones who barely even tasted the food as it went down. And then the picky eaters, the ones who took the time to peel off any unwanted pickles or whatever, complaining the whole time.

But then there were men like Weston, who ate heartily but politely. Using a napkin, chewing and swallowing before talking, and taking their time to savor. But you could tell that they were enjoying their food and glad to have it.

Weston finished his second burger and then offered the bag to her. "This last one's for you. And then we'll go on the next part of our date."

“And you’re not going to tell me any more, are you?” She was thrilled at how special he was making this. And how even sitting on the swings eating burgers could be exciting.

“No. I’m not.” He paused. “It’s not anything fancy, obviously. But it’s just some things that I thought you’d enjoy.”

When he held out the bag for her again, she sucked in a breath. “I thought I’d get too full to eat that one, but I’m kinda here for it.”

He gave a hearty laugh. “Then eat it. Quick.”

She took the bag from him and unwrapped the cheeseburger. “Thanks for not judging me for liking McDonalds.”

“Well, thank *you* for not judging me for giving it to you on our first official date. And for not giving you fries and drinks and shakes and everything. Just trust the process, okay?”

She grinned and told him she would.

The rest of the evening was a series of both endearing and fun things. They got fruit smoothies from a shop in Bartlett, then took a walk along the river greenbelt there.

“This is the only acceptable thing about Bartlett,” Ruby told him. “These beautiful pathways along the river.”

“I’ve known about the rivalry for as long as I can remember. Gramps would talk about it.”

“Oh, it’s something else, this rivalry between two towns. And actually, ever since starting my job, I’ve been able to mature a bit where Bartlett is concerned. I have enough coworkers and clients from here that I’ve discovered it can’t be all that bad, right?”

Later, they drove back to Silver Plum, and Weston pretended to be able to breathe easier once they crossed the city limits and out of Bartlett. He slowed the car and pulled over on the empty road.

“Okay, we have options. If you’re getting tired, I can take you home, and we can call it a night. Or—”

Ruby interrupted. "I'll take the 'or.'"

He grinned from ear to ear. "I have a card game that I thought we could play up in the canyon. There's a place my Gramps used to take me up there that has some nice tables for the cards. And I have firewood and stuff for s'mores, too. But first, I'm ready for you to give me a tour."

"A tour?" She turned her head from side to side. "A tour of what?"

He held out his arms. "Of Ruby Garza's Silver Plum. I want to see where you went to elementary school. Where you had your first date and your first job. Where you go to church. Everything."

Oh, scratches. Why did he have to be so utterly perfect in every way? This just wasn't fair at all to her heart.

"Brace yourself, Weston. It's super exciting." She rolled her eyes but then pointed to the road. "Get to driving, sir!"

She giggled and grabbed the armrest of the truck as he gunned it and peeled out onto the road like a man on a mission.

"Okay, so you showed him the spud cellar where you had your first job, then what?" Mabel and Ruby sat at a small table inside the Schmear Campaign Bagel Shop on Main Street in Silver Plum. The spring morning light shone through the blinds on the windows, and the scent of hazelnut coffee from the back wafted through the air.

"Oh, I forgot. Before that, we drove past Gina Corvalis's house."

Mabel's nose crinkled. "Why did you drive past our elementary school principal's house? I mean, I liked her and all, but this is getting to be a little much."

"Because that was my first babysitting job."

"Oooh. Gotcha," Mabel said.

“Hey, he kept saying he wanted to know everything about me, so I really showed him. And he kept saying Silver Plum had suddenly become an exciting place because of me.”

Mabel’s eyes grew wide. “Wow. It sounds like he really likes you.” She smiled, and the dimples on her fair cheeks blossomed.

Ruby’s heart stuttered at the thought. “He better. Because the way he kissed me sure made it seem like he does.”

Mabel squealed, and Ruby promptly tried to hush her.

“We’re not kids anymore. You don’t have to squeal about the fact that someone kissed me.”

“Yes, I do! You’ve been using the dating app for what, a year now? And how many of those guys did you kiss?”

Ruby shrugged. “None. Unless you count the twenty-one-year-old who asked if he could kiss my cheek.”

“Nah, we are not counting that.” They both agreed.

“Tell me all about it,” Mabel rubbed under her eyes and yawned. “Ugh. Sorry. I was up studying until late last night.”

“We shouldn’t have met up so early. Mabel, you need your sleep.”

“No, no. I needed to get up. I have to shadow a nursing shift at the hospital in Rexburg tonight, but before that, I have to take a test. And then I’m helping Mack with some stuff, so he can prepare for the city council meeting next week.”

“Mabel, are you okay with all this? When Mack appointed you to be head of the water authority, you weren’t in nursing school. I think it’s okay if you want to step down. At least until you’re done with school.”

“But I like the work I’m doing for the city. And I’m worried that if I don’t do it, no one will. Or worse, Mack will try, and he already has way too much on his plate.”

“What’s the latest with the water resolution?” Ruby bunched up her face. “I’m scared to ask.”

“No, you do not. We are not changing the subject away from you and Weston Wade.”

Ruby finished her bite of bagel. “I’ll get back to that, I promise.”

“Well, the latest is that we’re shunting seventeen percent of our water from Harvey Pond to Bartlett currently. And that will just go down more and more as soon as we can get pipes connected to a lot more of Silver Plum.”

“So, Mack’s well is turning out okay?”

“So far, so good.” Mabel laughed. “Who would have ever thought Mack would become such a good mayor.”

Ruby shook her head. “I wish I could have told my younger self that he’d be mayor someday instead of being so worried about him because he used to laugh so hard that milk came out of his nose at lunchtime.”

“Okay, that’s so gross.”

“Tell me about it,” Ruby said. “Do you think we should let Cady know? I mean, just so she can prepare herself for when Henry starts doing the same thing?”

“Maybe. That might be a kind gesture,” Mabel said with a grin. She took her phone out of her pocket, then sucked in a breath. “I forgot to tell you. Look what Hannah sent last night. Her finalized color scheme!”

“She didn’t send that to me,” Ruby said, jutting her lip out. Usually, Hannah included them all on group texts and Marco Polos about the wedding plans for the biggest wedding Silver Plum had ever seen. Originally, Hannah’s fiancé, August Bailey, had told everyone he wanted to keep the wedding small and intimate, maybe a destination wedding to his parents’ vacation home in Greece. But as time went on, he decided he was good with more people there. And since his mother was the famed, Oscar-winning former actress, Victoria Bailey, that meant many Hollywood stars and worldwide dignitaries would be coming to town.

“She didn’t send it to you because she knew you were out on a hot date. We couldn’t interrupt any loving moments you

two might have shared.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. I do love the colors she’s chosen. Pantone’s Very Peri and Terracotta Orange? Unique but pretty. And perfect for an autumn wedding at the Bailey mansion.”

August had been repairing and adding on to the mansion for years, in solitude until Hannah entered his life. Now it seemed a fitting venue for their wedding.

Mabel glanced at her watch. “I only have an hour to do some yoga with Anjali before I meet with Mack about the city council meeting, so I need to run. But first, one more question.”

Ruby squirmed. Mabel’s “one more question” usually was deep and very hard to answer.

“Can you see yourself with Weston long-term? Does this have potential to go anywhere?” Her eyebrows rose, and her head tilted to one side.

Ruby knew it. Of course, Mabel’s last question would be the most personal of all.

“My heart says yes ... maybe? My head says definitely not.”

“And why not?” Mabel wasn’t showing any approval or disapproval. That was what made her so easy to talk to. Tory let her opinions be known, but not Mabel. She was diplomatic and could see many sides to the situation. Same with Anjali, but Anjali was always pro-love, whatever that meant in any situation.

“Because I don’t trust my judgment. Because I’ve seen too many horror stories about what can happen to you if you fall in love, or what can happen to your loved ones.”

Mabel listened to Ruby’s explanation, her lips in a thin line. “I hear you. Love is scary. Taking that risk is scary. And closing yourself off to it is also scary because you’re still going to have hardships and heartache. That’s just part of being human. But if you close yourself off, you’ll be sure to go through them alone.”

Ruby's chin tipped up. "I'm not afraid of being alone."

"I know. Most of the time, I'm not either," Mabel rubbed Ruby's arm. "And then I remember that connection with others is what we're hardwired for. Maybe we can't reach our highest heights if we don't have those highest connections."

"When did you get so smart about the yucky love stuff?" Ruby teased.

Mabel stood and wiped her hands on a napkin. "Ever since all my friends started falling in love." She rolled her eyes and grabbed her wallet from the table. "Gotta run, but maybe you should give Anjali a call, too. She's not the love doctor for nothing."

"Maybe. But she's also planning a wedding, and I ..."

Mabel placed a hand on Ruby's arm. "Ruby, Anj has time for you. We all do."

"Really, the bottom line is ... losing Chantel's baby really shook me up. I know I need to do some more healing around that. But it always gets pushed to the side when I'm working with clients with far more pressing needs, you know?"

"But Ruby, you're important, too. Your mental health and wellbeing are just as important as your clients'."

"I know that. But try telling me that when I'm so spent emotionally at the end of the day that the last thing I want to do is talk about my own problems."

"True. But after losing the baby, you threw your heart and soul into this program. And it was a good thing for a while. Setting aside your own pain to help teen girls is really great. Really noble. But you know as well as I do that unresolved things have a way of creeping back up, sometimes sideways." She gave Ruby a hug.

"Whoa. You should be the social worker."

"Ha ha. But one random, possibly totally wrong thought I had was, maybe you're trying to sabotage yourself from a relationship with Weston because those same fears you experienced before, of losing the baby, of feeling like you

wouldn't have been a good mother anyway, have been coming to the surface. Falling in love can do that—bring all these long-swept under the rug feelings.”

Ruby could only nod. Her eyes stung with tears.

She really was falling in love with Weston.

But she had a feeling that her scarred and frightened self wasn't going to be able to figure out a way to do anything about it.

Chapter Nineteen

Weston surveyed the grazing land that had been in the Wade family for three generations now. It was a bluff high above Silver Plum, and Tory Olson had made the arrangement to have the first truckload of cattle delivered this morning. Even though the acreage was on the other side of the mountain, the main road that crossed the ranch and led into the canyon was the best route to take. Sometimes, the narrow canyon curves were too much for cattle trucks to make it, which was why the property had stayed in the family this long: not many were interested in buying the hard-to-access parcel.

But Weston loved it up there. To him, the remoteness was a plus. It was quieter than anywhere else. If Ruby thought the ranch was nice and quiet, she'd love the stillness of the grazing land.

It was cold still, though, which was the whole point. High and cool, so the cows and calves were nice and happy. Then in late fall, the great exodus would begin, and they'd herd them down to the ranch to settle in for winter.

The problem was, a hundred head was not going to bring in much cash. They needed hundreds of cows to make enough money to continue. But Weston had to be really patient and slow with this process, and pray that Gramps changed his mind soon.

Gramps's two old-timer ranch hands were supposed to be meeting him up here. Weston had been relieved when they'd agreed to quit their other ranch jobs and come back.

The wind picked up, the brush bending from the force of it. Weston buttoned up the top button of his corduroy jacket and eased back into this position, leaning against the fence. He might have to go get back in his truck to wait if they didn't come soon.

He thought of Ruby and how good it had felt to hold her. That would warm him right up, holding Ruby in his arms. He thought of the way they'd kissed. She was everything. The very thing she was doing—making a difference in the lives of the teens who would come to the ranch—was just one of many things that drew her to him. He almost couldn't believe someone would give so much time, energy, and work to help a few at-risk kids. And she did it with such passion and determination.

Her laugh, her sense of humor, the way she felt when he wrapped her in a hug, how she'd looked when she shivered, and he pulled her close. Those big baby browns, the darkest he'd ever seen, framed by long lashes—natural, she'd told him because social workers didn't have the time or funds to fuss with lash extensions. Everything about her made him go weak. Everything about her made him want more and more of her.

It wasn't long before Federico and Blake arrived. He gave them hugs; they'd been around when he was fifteen and first started working at the ranch the summer that changed the trajectory of his life. He could safely say they played a part in him waking up.

“You ready for this, Wes?” Blake asked.

“I think so. I'm not sure Gramps is.”

The hands gave each other a side glance. “We were both surprised when you asked us to come back,” Federico said.

“I guess you didn't think the ranch would ever be rebuilt?”

Federico had an uneasy look. He seemed to choose his words carefully. “Your Gramps seemed ready for retirement. He'd talked about it for a few years. It's not easy to close down a ranch for good, you know? Most of our job at the end was closing things up and selling things off.”

“Too bad he never mentioned all this to me. When he asked me to come work for him, I got the impression that he wanted me to restore operations to their capacity, or at least so that they were fully functional.”

“That does seem strange, Wes,” Blake said. “I wonder why he’d say that. Not that we’re complaining. If he’s changed his mind, that’s great.”

An unease sped through him. It’d been established with Gramps that Weston had made some assumptions. Maybe he let his excitement for the opportunity blind him to what Gramps’s actual words had been.

Gramps was always joking around, making threats to do this or that.

And Weston hadn’t paid attention. Which is what had happened as a teen, when his choices were reckless. When he’d rushed and not thought things out.

“Have you seen Gramps yet since you got back?” Weston asked the men.

“No, but we’ve each talked to him on the phone and compared notes. He told us both that he would be glad to have us back, that it would be fun to get things up and running again, but he’s worried about all the work this will take.”

“Doesn’t he understand that I’ll be doing the work?” Weston scratched his head under his hat. “And that I am capable of it? I’ve been doing this for years. I want to give him a good nest egg. Instead of sitting there on the ranch all alone with nothing but memories, I’m giving him a chance to see it like it was before. Better than it was before.”

Federico shifted in his stance, his hands jammed in his pockets. “He’d always told us he wanted to maybe go live closer to your aunt. Get a small place in town where he wasn’t so isolated. Maybe have more of a social life.” Federico boomed out a guffaw. “Well, he did not say that last part, but that’s what I’d assumed.”

No way, no how was Weston going to imagine his grandfather’s social life. Gramps didn’t need one; he’d had

Grandma. Her death had just about done Gramps in. But that didn't mean he needed a replacement. She was everything Gramps had ever needed and more. Besides, he'd told Weston before that he had no interest in remarrying.

Weston looked at Federico and Blake. "What did you think would happen to the ranch?"

"Well, Earl wanted to sell it," Blake said. "But not like it was. He was too prideful to have someone come in with the amount of disrepair. A lot has changed in ranching in the last twenty years, you know? He just wanted to tear most of it down."

Federico cut in. "Not the house or the big barn. But he wanted all the rest gone. He figured whoever bought the place would have to spend a pretty penny getting rid of it all and starting from scratch."

"I've seen it before," Blake added. "It's the pride. And I'm not necessarily saying that's a bad thing. But the pride of knowing when to let go. To be the one to usher it out of the world yourself, so no one goes and ruins it. He didn't want to watch that happen."

The air left Weston's body, and shame filled in the spaces. Would he ever be good enough for Gramps? "But I wasn't going to ruin it."

"He just might not have known your plans, Wes. You've been happy up in Wyoming, running another ranch, for years. How was he to know you'd want to abandon all that, abandon your family, and come here?"

Weston's chest burned and it felt as though someone had stamped, hard, onto his throat. He had to get out of there. He had to talk to Gramps.

Blake and Federico must have seen it in his eyes because they both insisted he could go now that they were there. "We've done this a hundred times," Federico said before pushing Weston in the direction of his truck.

Weston had only driven a couple of miles down the mountain when his phone rang. The name on the caller ID was

not who he'd expected at all.

Chapter Twenty

Ruby sat on the sofa in her apartment, her laptop balanced on crossed legs. She looked over the list of candidates, a whisper of fear settling in her bones. Was this right? Were these the right eight girls she should mentor and love? Magda had given her recommendations of names based on information they had on file. Ruby only knew two of them. The rest were from other places.

These girls had been through traumas that Ruby herself couldn't even fathom. Yes, she'd lived in a van for a month as a child. But she'd had parents who loved and cared for her and each other. They still acted like they didn't like each other a lot of the time. But they still loved each other. And she could always turn to them whenever she needed them.

But these girls? Life wasn't so kind to them. Which was why the truth was the only thing that could set them free. And the truth was, these girls had had a rough go—an unfair start at life. The truth was also that they were strong individuals who had the ability to take what had happened to them and live through it, thriving on the other side. They had that ability deep inside themselves, and Ruby had to show them that.

She closed her laptop and leaned her head all the way back on the sofa. It would be nice if she could see Weston today. But he had to do some stuff with the cattle in the highlands.

The man worked his tail off for that place, getting up before the crack of dawn, doing crazy things like giving the horses their shots *and* avoiding getting kicked in the head.

She thought of how he worked, what he looked like. She'd seen him lift bales of hay, and man was that a beautiful sight.

But he wasn't just a tall drink of water to her anymore.

She wanted to be with him, talk with him, whether she could see him or not. If she was in a pitch-black place with him, it would be just as exciting to talk with him.

And then she thought of being in the dark with him and, oh man, the thoughts that that image conjured up contained some material that she could never, for instance, share with her little Sunday School kids ... or their parents.

Hello! She needed to get up off that couch and distract herself with something else, like cleaning the crud that always built up in the bottom of the dishwasher. Yeah. That might switch her thinking up.

The doorbell rang, and Ruby had visions of it being Weston, in a flannel shirt and jeans, come to give her a kiss and a treat.

No such luck. She opened the door, and it was Earl's neighbor, Cynthia Hughes.

"I would have called before I came, but someone has an unlisted number." Cynthia looked like she had just rolled out of a fancy English horse riding magazine. She wore jodhpur trousers—at least that's what Ruby thought they might be called—and a riding coat. If she'd had a tasseled horsewhip and a trim helmet, Ruby might have mistaken her for British royalty and bowed.

"Uh, come in. Mrs. Hughes, right?" Ruby did a quick scan of her apartment, but it was pointless. There was no cleaning up now, and she knew she'd kicked off at least one pair of dirty socks under the coffee table. Oh well, life was too short to worry about things like that, even though she did wish Cynthia didn't look so disapproving of her place.

"Thank you. And it's Ms. Hughes. I was widowed a few years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

She batted her hand at Ruby before taking a seat on the sofa, her excellent posture encouraging Ruby to straighten her own shoulders. Ruby's socks, one pink and one yellow, but definitely worn at the same time, barely peeked out from under the table. With any luck, Ms. Hughes wouldn't notice.

"Did you ride over here?" Ruby craned her neck to look out the front window. If there was a horse out there, she could give her a bucket of water.

Cynthia gave a disgusted look. "Of course not."

Ruby pointed to the clothes, but Cynthia just shook her head in disbelief, as if she were saying: *How dumb did this one come, huh?*

"I heard the program for at-risk girls is still happening. Do you have all your permits in place?"

"We're nearly there, yes."

Cynthia sniffed. "And inspections? Have those been done yet?"

"Ms. Hughes, can I ask why you're here? Do you have someone in mind who could be a participant in the program?" Ruby doubted that, but she couldn't stop herself from asking.

Mrs. Hughes tsked, clicking her tongue in that way she had. "Of course not. I came to be a good neighbor. If it were me, I'd want to know."

Ruby's insides only sunk a little. She knew many Cynthias. And most of the time, they were worriers of the most benign things. "Want to know what?"

"I trust that you'll be getting background checks for Mr. Wade and his grandson?" Cynthia fiddled with a thin chain bracelet on her wrist.

"Well, yes. The foundation requires us to get background checks for anyone working on the premises."

"It's a pity background checks aren't very thorough."

Ruby lifted a shoulder. "I think they're just fine. We use them in my line of work all the time."

“And how often are they unreliable?” Cynthia asked. “They can’t predict with any amount of certainty at all how fit someone is to work with children.”

“Ms. Hughes, I’m not sure what you’re trying to say, but I need to get back to my work.” Ruby motioned to the laptop. She wasn’t going to mention her plan to clean out the gunk in the dishwasher.

“I’ve come because I’m concerned. The Wades aren’t what they seem.”

“Can you elaborate?”

Cynthia sniffed and looked around the room, seeming to deliberate if Ruby was worthy enough to hear such information.

“There’s a lot that I can’t confirm or deny, and you understand my difficulties in coming to you like this. Earl’s my neighbor, and I can’t jeopardize our necessary working relationship as neighbors. I’ve come to you at great risk.”

Ruby only nodded, her head beginning to throb.

“When Earl’s wife was alive, things seemed fine,” Cynthia continued. “But since she’s passed on, there have been some ... worrisome comings and goings and strange activities. Oh, and I often see strange things in their garbage can. Like they’re hiding something.”

Ruby snorted. “Why are you looking in their garbage?”

“Oh, I’m not, of course. But we have to haul it to the same dumpster area. Silver Plum doesn’t have a garbage truck service for us rural people way out there. I usually have my groundskeeper do it for me. But anyway, there are times I do it, and I happen to see things in the garbage Earl Wade has dumped, and let me tell you, it’s suspicious.”

“Is that all?”

“No. I wish. How much do you know about Weston Wade’s past?”

Ruby felt as possessive of Weston now as she was of the girls in the program. “I know enough to know he’s a good

man.”

Cynthia tilted her head to one side and bounced her crossed leg. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

When Ruby didn’t respond, Cynthia continued. “Were you aware that Weston Wade came to live with his grandparents when he was a teen?”

“Yes, Weston talks about it all the time. It was an important step in his life.”

“Do you know why he came?”

“No. And I don’t need to know.”

Cynthia smirked. “Well, do you want the participants of your program to be safe?”

Ruby only glared. That was a dumb question, and she didn’t have to answer it like a weakling.

Cynthia clicked her tongue again. “Weston Wade came here because he’d been accused of several crimes and proven guilty of a couple. He was an out-of-control young man, and some say he still has those tendencies today.”

A fire stoked in her belly. Several crimes? Could this be true? “Are you under the impression that what someone did fourteen years ago when they were a kid has any bearing on the kind of person they are today?”

“That depends on what it was that they did. And the measures they’ve taken to repair the damage they caused.” She sat up straighter. “I don’t see any of that sort of maturing. And if he doesn’t have a criminal record, it’s simply because he was a bit underage, not because he doesn’t deserve to have one.”

So many words formed in Ruby’s throat, threatening to get out. *This could get ugly fast.*

She took a steadying breath. “I think you’re in dangerous territory when you start to try to figure out what another person deserves. I’ve seen nothing of this as I’ve gotten to know Weston. He’s a wonderful person.”

“Gotten to know him?” Cynthia’s smile was without kindness. “You barely know him at all. I’ve watched him grow up. I knew him when he was a baby. You should be asking me about his character instead of making assumptions from knowing a person for a matter of weeks.” She threw a hand out to her side, and her black hair swayed.

Ruby wanted to say that she could learn about a person’s character just by getting to know the person themselves, not listening to others’ opinions. Her own judgment was what mattered most, right? But the thoughts tumbled in her head, round and round like socks in a dryer. Soft but mixed up.

As a social worker, she couldn’t ever rely solely on her own impressions. She had to look at data, and that, combined with her gut instincts that she was honing over time, was what would determine someone being safe to work with children.

Ruby took a deep breath. “The foundation conducts thorough research to ensure that all participants in their programs are as safe as possible. I don’t have any concerns with the processes they use to do that.”

Cynthia’s expression darkened. “Character references play a key role in that process, and I plan to submit my findings on the matter as soon as possible.”

“That would be great. I appreciate you caring about the safety of our participants.”

Cynthia held up her palms. “That’s all that this is about. It’s not personal to the Wades, and I hope they can understand.”

“Just be sure that your findings are true and accurate. And are you sure this isn’t coming up now because your first tactic didn’t work?”

“Tactic?”

“Complaining to me about the participants somehow being a danger to you and your business.” Ruby couldn’t contain her laugh.

Cynthia’s face sprouted red stains on her cheeks. “I’m always true and accurate. Like I said, this is about the safety

and well-being of the children.”

“You didn’t care about their safety when you were thinking of an electric fence. You were only thinking of your own. A ridiculous concern, by the way.” A sick feeling started to settle in, and that’s when she knew she needed to step back. It wouldn’t be beneficial to the Wades, the girls, or herself to keep going down this road right now.

Cynthia left without another word, leaving an air of expensive, and frankly unappealing, perfume.

Ruby paced the entire length of her apartment, fuming. Stewing.

Earl and Weston Wade were some of the finest people she knew—she was sure of that. But she had an obligation to these girls. She had to pursue any complaint that came up in this process—that was the only ethical thing to do.

But what was it that Weston did as a kid that had Cynthia Hughes coming all the way into town to Ruby’s apartment?

And why hadn’t he told her anything about this?

Chapter Twenty-One

To say Weston was a fish out of water would be like saying chocolate is delicious. Or, for all the chocolate haters out there, it would be like saying grass grows green.

No need to state the obvious.

It was the first Saturday of the month of May, and apparently, that meant it was KNO. Cue the fish-out-of-water feeling.

Kids' Night Out? More like Almost Siblings' Night Out. Because they bickered and were in each other's business like nothing he'd ever seen.

It only took about three seconds from the time Ruby introduced him to everyone, and he'd gotten their names for the questions and comments to start shooting at him like pepper spray.

"How many head are you gunning for up there on the ranch, now?" Zane asked. He looked like he spent time fighting fires, playing football, and hunting elk, all on the same day.

Before Weston could try to figure out how to answer that complicated question—because that really depended on whether you were asking him or Gramps—Hannah, who sat next to him, grinned. "Ruby's never brought anyone to KNO before."

Anjali, whose hair was dyed a raspberry sherbet shade, and Tory, the one who'd brokered the cattle deal, were looking at

him as if they were trying to see inside his soul—and from the looks on their faces, they were betting his soul was even with Jack the Ripper until he could prove otherwise.

He recognized Mack, the mayor, just from sight, but he would have figured it out by the firm handshake he gave him after he switched the baby he was holding to his other arm. “Welcome. I know you’ve been here quite a bit over the years, but it’s great you’ve settled down here.”

Well, was he settled, though? A month ago, he was sure he was because he was home. The ranch was home. But he didn’t want to stay here with nothing to do if Gramps were going to close it down.

Ruby could be the only thing that he’d stay for, if that happened.

But his former boss at Tillman Ranch had called the other night, excited about an opportunity at his brother’s ranch in Missouri. He asked if Weston would be willing to take things over there.

Thanks, but I don’t think so, had been his answer. But it was nice to know there were other possibilities out there.

He started to thank Mack when his wife, Cady, interrupted. “We know how it feels to be new to the group and not know anyone, right, Parker and August?” Cady waited for both of them to nod their heads. It seemed to Weston that they probably could very rarely get a word in edgewise around here. “All the rest of these peeps have been coming to this since high school, so it can be a little intimidating.”

“But over time, they’ll start to grow on you, don’t worry,” Parker said with a small smile.

“Dellynn, can we place our orders now?” Tory asked, moving her hair out of her face so she could see the menu. “I’m starving.”

Dellynn nodded and held up a finger as she typed something on the touch screen on the maître d stand.

“Want some of my protein drink until the food comes?” Anjali asked, tipping a little carton jug in her direction.

Tory made a face. “That stuff smells like fermented cheese.”

“It’s chocolate flavored and vegan,” Anjali said. “If you chew mint Extra while you drink it, it’s not half bad.” She made a show of chewing her gum and everyone laughed.

Tory just massaged her head. “I’ll wait for my chicken fingers,” she said while glancing again in Dellynn’s direction.

“I don’t mind waiting a little,” Mabel said, “We’re all here tonight. Even little Henry.” She pointed at Mack’s baby’s pudgy form. “This hasn’t happened in so long.” She tossed a look at Zane. “I want to enjoy it.”

August and Parker exchanged looks. “We were just thinking August, Cady, and I could go to another table with Weston and give him some tips on how to survive this group,” Parker said. “You know, give him a cheat sheet on you guys, so he’s not surprised or anything.”

“Anything that’s said about us can be said to the whole group,” Hannah said. “That’s how we operate. At least that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

Dellynn came to the table to take orders.

“I’m very curious about what you’d say about us all.” Anjali’s brow was raised, and she smirked at Parker. “We’re ordering appetizers first, though. Tory needs food STAT.”

After Dellynn left, and apparently, she could remember all the separate orders in her head because she didn’t have a notepad or pen in hand, the buzz started again. Cady and Hannah whispered something back and forth, Anjali and August were sipping their drinks, and Liam and Mack seemed to be talking about the NBA.

Inexplicably, some of them started singing the words to Garth Brooks’ “Friends in Low Places,” a song that had been canonized in Weston’s mind as one of the greatest ever.

That was a good sign. Weston figured they couldn’t be too bad of a group if they loved that song as much as he did.

But soon, the various conversations started up again, and at one point, Anjali and Liam arm-wrestled, with Zane slapping a ten-dollar bill on the table, saying his money was on Anj.

Okaaay.

Ruby leaned over as their appetizers were being brought in and whispered in his ear. “We’re all in fine form tonight.” Her gaze was apologetic, her smile straight across, her eyes pleading.

But he didn’t have a chance to answer.

“Wait! You guys!” Hannah shouted. And from the looks of everyone at the table, yelling at the table wasn’t something she did very often. “Mack, you can explain this a bit more, but I forgot to tell you all that Freddy Vega will be at our city council meeting on Tuesday.”

“Freddy Vega, teen heartthrob?” Tory, who’d seemed a little grumpy all night, perked up.

At the same time, Liam and Mabel both said, “From ‘L.A. High Blues?’”

Hannah hummed in agreement. “Well, I preferred him as the host of the reality show, ‘Back to Romance,’ but yeah, he’s the one.” She looked expectantly at Mack for support.

“Yes!” Mack jumped in. “He’s been helping third world countries with sustainable water sources.”

“It’s been a passion project for him the past few years,” Hannah said. “He even spoke about it in front of the United Nations last month.”

“What else has he got to do? He hasn’t worked as an actor in years.” August’s surly pout might have been because his fiancée was cooing over a famous actor. Well, semi-famous actor.

“How in the world did you get him to come?” Anjali asked.

“She’s been writing to him for months, commenting on his posts, asking him to stop by the next time he’s—” Mack did

air quotes. “In the area.” He laughed. “My question was, who’s ever in the area around here?”

“But then his assistant randomly called me last night, completely out of the blue.” Hannah grinned. “He sent an email at the same time, too, but basically, he just asked if it would be okay if Freddy came to talk with the city council about the well Mack had drilled and all the benefits of what he’s done. It’s really exciting. I’ve been working overtime all day on press releases and invitations to local leaders and influencers.”

Zane took a long pull of his drink. “Sounds like he’s using us for a publicity stunt or something.”

“So what if he is?” Mabel asked, her face pinking up. “It’s mutually beneficial. We’ll get more support for Mack’s pipelines to and from the well, and Freddy will get more support for his global work. I think it’s awesome.”

Zane’s expression was verging on stony, and he and Mabel locked eyes for a moment. Something passed between them, but since Weston had only known them for about twenty total minutes, he didn’t have any idea what that was all about.

“Whether you doubt his motives or not, can everybody swing by that night?” Mack sobered. “The more people we have in attendance, the better.”

Ruby piped in. “Yeah, we usually don’t get many people there. I can’t see why the farmers and ranchers arguing with each other about every last thing for five generations and counting wouldn’t be on everyone’s list of fun and exciting things to do around here.” Ruby had said it while leaning closer to Weston. He liked that he felt more like a couple that way.

The entrees were brought over, and soon the discussion turned in ways only people who’d known each other their whole lives could do. Liam and Mack started talking about the best teen angst television shows of their time, and everyone had to add their opinion.

Several minutes into the discussion, which was getting oddly heated, Weston leaned over to Ruby, her apple-scented hair brushing against his cheek and almost doing him in, right then and there.

“They’re arguing as if this itself was a UN meeting about life and death and war policies.”

She giggled as she finished chewing a bite of her food. “Of course. You don’t know my friends very well, do you? They could turn a discussion on favorite candy bars into a three-night brawl. We’re all a little opinionated when we’re together.” She pointed to Cady, “Even she’s getting into it, and she’s usually pretty level-headed in every other aspect of her life.”

“August has a vein bulging in his forehead,” Weston whispered.

Again, Ruby collapsed in quiet giggles. “He always gets that. He’s broody. I just think he needs to get married already.”

“All right, all right, everybody,” Anjali’s grin was kind, but her eyes were still blazing. “Can we please talk about something else now?”

Tory massaged her temples. “Yes, please.” Liam slid his arm over his wife’s shoulders, looking concerned.

“Another thing that’s happening at the city council meeting is—” Several people interrupted her with groans of frustration at her mentioning the meeting again. She ignored them and simply raised a hand. “—Something that Ruby and Weston are involved in.”

Ruby and Weston shared a glance, and then she started in. “Some of you have heard about this, but the project I’ve been working on is finally happening. It’s a project called Rise Up, and it’s to help at-risk teen girls. The foundation board and the city have to give final approval on Tuesday, but ...” She looked at Weston, a measured excitement in her eyes. “It looks like it’s really going to happen.”

A round of cheers and “here here” to clinking glasses reverberated across the dining room. A few other patrons

clapped, even though they didn't know what was going on.

The friends asked what they could do to help, and various conversations began again. Finally, Anjali tapped her glass with her knife. "You say the program is six weeks, right? So, it will be ending in ... July?"

"The end of July, yes," Weston said, feeling a surge of protectiveness over the project and for Ruby herself. He would do anything to make sure this came about.

Anjali looked at Parker, who leaned back in his chair, a grin taking over his face. "That's good because, Ruby, it wouldn't be the same without you," he said. "Glad you can come now. Hopefully?"

"You all know what a travel bug I am," Anjali said. "And with the wedding plans and growing my yoga business, I haven't had nearly enough time to do that, so ... we've decided to have a destination wedding. On August fifteenth, we're flying you all to Jamaica!"

Mabel stood from the table, laughing. "All of us? Anj! How? Jamaica won't know what hit it with all these Idaho bumpkins rolling in."

"Parker's parents offered." Anjali's face shone, and a snigger burst out. "Apparently, they had an account for weddings and schooling, and since Parker put himself through school, there was extra."

Everyone took their turn to hug both Parker and Anjali. This time, the random patron's clapping was louder. "Did someone just get engaged?"

Tory smiled politely but then whispered something to Liam and excused herself from the table, half running, half walking to the bathroom.

"Is she okay?" Cady asked.

Liam hesitated. "I ... I'll go see if she needs anything." His brow was creased as he sped away from the table.

Anjali sucked in a breath of air, her eyes growing round. "I think I know why Tory's been acting funny."

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Can you take a little time off work here and there, Tory? Just until after the first trimester is over?” Ruby grinned at Tory through her Marco Polo send. “I hope so. I’m just so excited for you.”

Tory was pregnant! The second of the KNO women to get pregnant. Cady had been the first, a KNO newbie after she married O.G. Mack.

The women of KNO had been Marco Poloing, texting, and calling furiously since the group had discovered Tory and Liam’s big news. They weren’t supposed to know. But once it occurred to Anjali, she didn’t have to say anything more. Everyone figured it out.

And by the time Liam and Tory made it back to the table, everyone was awkwardly silent. Finally, Tory broke the news, swearing the group to secrecy since it was still early on in the pregnancy.

“We told you guys we wanted to start trying for a baby. Joke was on us because I was already pregnant,” Tory had said that night, a glint in her eye as she stole a look at Liam.

Ruby thought of all kinds of baby stuff she wanted to get for them and had to force herself to stop using the app that mishmashes the couples’ faces to see what the baby looked like. Each one was hilarious; each version was different. But a couple of them were actually pretty cute. She sent them all to Tory and Liam.

Yes, she had to stop creating disturbing baby faces and adding swimsuits and other tropical paradise-perfect clothes

for Anjali and Parker's wedding to her online shopping cart. She needed to focus. She was saying a few words at the city council meeting that night. And with the somewhat famous Freddy Vega there, it was sure to be a packed house, which she was telling herself was a good thing. The more who knew about what she was trying to achieve through this program, the better. She just hoped there wouldn't be much dissension on the council.

She prayed that Cynthia Hughes wouldn't be there, but she knew she would be. She'd even gone so far as to leave Ruby a voicemail on Monday morning, saying that she was just wondering what progress had been made about researching the safety of the Wade Ranch and its owners.

That woman was out to get them, wasn't she? Ruby had tried to see if there was some angle, some past dispute that could have caused Cynthia to think this. It all felt very suspicious ... like her words weren't really about this situation at all, but something else entirely. Revenge, maybe?

But in the still moments of the day, in between working with clients at the Center, making phone calls, filling in data—whenever there was a pause, her mind wandered. What if there was any truth to these accusations?

Also, what did Weston do to gain a criminal record at such an age, an age that made it so his priors wouldn't be seen publicly? She knew he passed the background check that the foundation required. But background checks weren't failproof.

She pulled up to City Hall, its off-white paint and orange trim reminding her of a Creamsicle.

Okay, this wasn't fun at all. Trying to give a presentation on Rise Up felt like sharing her sixth-grade diary with the high school football team.

Could she skip this and go hang out on the ranch instead?

Please, God. This is a good request, right? I'm not asking for a bucketload of cash, to be Instagram famous, or anything like that. I'm just asking for help tonight.

And for everyone to vote in favor of it.

And for my little client Natalie to get better from the stomach flu, so she can stop puking already and come hang out at the Center again.

Ruby might not have felt confident in knowing what counted as God's voice in her life anymore, but she had to give herself credit for continuing to try.

She cursed under her breath when she saw Mack on the front steps. Too late to make a run for it. Besides, the girls needed her to do this. She could do this.

"Are you personally greeting everyone who comes in?" Ruby half laughed at Mack and his uncharacteristically straight posture.

"It's a thing I'm trying this time." His smile eased a little, and that signature Mack sparkle lit up his eyes. "I'd rather just be home blowing strawberries on Henry's chubby tummy. Have you seen the rolls on this guy?" He took his phone out of his pocket and started scrolling through photos.

"He's filling out quite nicely. Good job, Daddy."

"Well, Cady deserves all the credit at this point, but he's almost ready to try real food. Do you think we should give him a vegetable baby food first or a fruit baby food?"

Ruby held up a hand. "This is way out of my league. I mostly work with teens and adult women, so I have no idea. I'm sure you'll choose the right thing, though."

Several minutes later, after she'd extricated herself from the claws of the proudest dad in the universe, she entered the city council room, already half full even though it didn't start for another half hour.

Magda was there, sitting on the front row, ready with a small laptop in hand. Her brown hair was tied up in a chignon at her neck. "Ruby, you look wonderful."

Ruby flattened her palms against the front of her skirt. She'd gone for a sensible herringbone gray suit, but at the last minute ditched the jacket for an off-white blouse with teardrop sleeves. She'd wanted to come across as being smart and professional, but in a color that showed off her rich

complexion and a hint of her shoulders, which she had lotioned up as she was heading out the door.

“Thanks. Can’t wait for this to be over.”

“It will pass, so try not to worry. Your package is flawless.”

Had the city council even had time to go over the package? Ruby and Magda had used the same materials as the press packet Ruby had created months ago but fleshed it out some more to discuss why Rise Up would be an asset to Silver Plum.

She said snippets of prayer in her head every chance she would get, asking God for some more everyday stuff like, could He please tell everyone to vote in the affirmative, and also help her palms to stop sweating?

After Freddy Vega arrived, her nerves shot through her again. Freddy brought with him a large entourage of people from the press, publicists, assistants, and who knows who else.

Ruby’s parents were ushered in right before the meeting started, giving her a smile as they found a seat in the back.

The first item on the agenda was the water piping, and Freddy gave a short speech on that. Then it was time for Mack to say a few words, along with the city council member in charge of balancing the budget.

City business was next, and that dragged. Finally, when it was Ruby’s turn, there was no hope for her palms.

I guess God thought having sweaty palms would build my character or something because I’m still sweating like a fountain.

“Seventeen years ago, my family and I found ourselves suddenly and unexpectedly homeless. I won’t go into detail about it, but it was a pivotal thing that shaped my life. Since that moment, my parents have been dedicated to their family’s prosperity at all costs. It’s through this lens that I’ve approached my career in social work and my biggest endeavor to date: Rise Up.”

She continued on, only getting tripped up when she saw a handsome man with broad shoulders standing in the back, his eyes lit up and a silly grin on his face.

Weston.

It was hard for her to know what she was saying after that, due to the roar of blood rushing in her ears. Apparently, she finished the speech okay, though, because there was a round of applause afterwards that seemed to stretch on a few seconds longer.

Afterward, she fielded a few questions from the press and Silver Plummers, all positive or neutral.

As the gathering afterward dwindled to just the KNO members, her parents, and Weston, she felt she could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

“Thanks for being here,” she said to the group.

“Gramps wanted to come, but he’s a little touchy about the ranch. He was nervous about people saying negative things about it. But he sent his good luck.” Weston held up his phone to show the text from Earl.

After a few minutes, it was just Ruby and Weston left. He slid a hand from her elbow to her fingertips, sending tingles throughout her.

“Excuse me, Weston Wade?” It was Cynthia Hughes, her mouth twisted in a sour duck face. The way she clutched a folder, like she was going to shove it in Weston’s hands and yell, “You’ve been served!” made Ruby nervous.

“Howdy, Ms. Hughes.” Weston didn’t seem happy to see her, but he was warmer than Ruby thought she could be.

Cynthia gave a slight nod. “I thought you should know I’ve filed a complaint with both the foundation that is backing the project, as well as with the Foster Care System and the Idaho Division of Child and Family Services.”

“Huh,” Weston said. “That’s good to know.”

How was he staying so calm?

“I’ve also let Magda Torres Sharp know, and she’s going to be putting the project on hold until all this can get figured out,” Cynthia said.

“Any beef you might have with me or my grandfather needs to be directly brought up against us. The past has nothing to do with Rise Up.”

“It has everything to do with it,” Cynthia said dryly. “I wouldn’t want to send my daughter to a program where the location is rife with boundary disputes and zoning violations, or where the people involved in the project have been indicted for defamation, vandalism, theft, underage drinking, and public intoxication.”

It was as if a balloon had deflated right before Ruby’s eyes as she felt and saw Weston slump. His face grew pale, and he let go of Ruby’s hand.

His voice was sharp but measured. “Ms. Ellis, as much as all of this screams of pettiness and redirection, I won’t get into that here and now. I will say that I welcome the query.” He spread his arms wide. “My grandfather and I have done our best to right any wrongdoings of the past. I’m looking forward to finally putting all of this to rest once and for all.”

Cynthia’s eyes grew cold, and her lips trembled. “If you think children should be allowed in your care, especially the most vulnerable of children, you’ve got another thing coming.”

He opened his mouth to speak, his brows jamming down. He shut it just as quickly and instead worked his jaw, his gaze penetrating Cynthia’s.

Ruby stepped forward. “Weston’s right. It will be nice to get all of this out and done with once and for all.” She felt her mouth grow dry. “I know the board will make the best decision for the girls.” She slipped her arm through Weston’s, and they turned to leave.

“Why didn’t she say anything about all this during the meeting?” Ruby asked Weston as they walked away. Her arms and legs shook, and she steadied herself by leaning against

him even more. “It seems to me that she would want as much negative attention out in public as soon as possible. That she would put up a public fight.”

When Weston didn’t say anything, she kept going. “I’m sorry about that. Her accusations were ...” Ruby couldn’t think of a strong enough word. Her gut had told her all along that Earl and Weston could be trusted and that a lot of healing would take place on the ranch. But now she didn’t know what to think.

“True. They’re all true.” Weston spun around to face her, letting her arm come unhooked from his. His gaze trained on the floor a moment, and then he looked up, his expression raw and fiery.

“What? How?” This didn’t feel real to Ruby.

“There’s a lot I need to tell you. Can you give me some time, though? I’m so sorry, Ruby. I just need a little time.” His eyes pleaded with her.

She swallowed roughly, her heartbeat pulsing in the arm that had held on to him tightly just a moment before. “Sure.” She nodded and then looked past him out to the street, seeing nothing. “Sure.”

Ruby walked to her car, her mind blurry. Numb.

She climbed in and shook out her hands a few times before placing them on the steering wheel.

At that moment, she wasn’t sure which could be worse. That Weston and/or Earl were guilty of the serious charges Cynthia Hughes claimed they were—that Weston himself claimed they were.

The skin on the back of her neck bristled.

Or that her gut instincts had been very, very wrong about the both of them.

Chapter Twenty-Three

For being on this side of recovery, where his eyes had been opened to his worth and value as a person, Weston sure didn't feel it now.

The past fourteen years of what he liked to think was his new life had mostly played out exactly how he'd dreamed. He'd become a rancher. Check. He'd stayed sober ... not a drop of alcohol had touched his lips since the age of fifteen. Check. He'd tried to be a good son, brother, and grandson, and made an effort to repair all the damage caused by his plunge into the dark all those years ago.

But now. The searing doubts of whether or not it would ever be enough, whether he could ever fully make amends, right the wrongs, or truly change were back in a bad way. And those thoughts were salted by the fact that his sins had hurt the woman he loved.

Horror shot through him as he drove home from the meeting, his arm cold where Ruby had gripped it with such trust and concern. Concern for him, when his past might have just cost her her dreams.

The rap sheet Cynthia Hughes had spouted sure summed it up well. When you said it like that, all the words strung together, a vicious combination of long ago past and more recent past, it sounded especially bad.

It was bad.

He was back at the ranch before he knew it, like he'd blinked and gotten there. He spun the truck in the gravel outside the garage, put it in park, and stalked inside.

“Gramps! Gramps, I need to talk to you.”

He was reclined in his chair, watching some comedy sitcom.

Gramps, when are you going to be converted to movies instead of this good-for-nothing trash?

Now was not the time to bring that up, though. Obviously.

When Gramps saw Weston’s face, he clicked the TV off, his expression full of concern.

Weston just paced. He wasn’t ready to sit yet. Did he even deserve to sit after all he’d done? Sitting implied a measure of complacency, right? Like he was feeling A-okay about all of this and needed a spot of tea while he mulled things over.

No. He didn’t deserve to just sit right now.

“Did the council vote against the program, Wes?” His voice was full of righteous anger at the thought.

“No. They voted for it.”

“Well, what’s wrong, then?” Gramps’s voice was gruff, but Weston knew that came from fear.

Weston glared at his grandfather. “Cynthia Hughes.”

Gramps sat stone-still, staring at Weston. Finally, he threw his hands in the air. “Hasn’t she caused enough trouble? What is she doing? Just because she thinks the girls will be a nuisance and soil her hoity-toity horse farm? That’s low.”

“I thought so, too.” Weston had told Gramps earlier about the first conversation Cynthia had with Ruby. “But Gramps. It’s all true, isn’t it?”

Gramps sobered. “Is it? What did she say?”

“She’s filed official complaints against us. Mostly me, but you’re in there, too. To both the foundation’s board, the foster care system, and the DFSS. She brought up the boundary dispute thing. And that time she discovered that the section of the property where we had the goats was the one square in the whole property not technically zoned for animal rights.”

Gramps blanched. “That was years ago.”

“Yes, but did it ever get officially resolved? There’s probably still an open case, but only because no one really cared enough to pursue it further. Even she lost interest in pursuing it. Anyway, she’s coming at us with both guns ablazing.” He pinched his nose between his eyes and groaned.

“We moved those goats, Wes. That’s not a problem anymore. We can prove that.”

“Okay. But what about the boundary dispute?”

At that, Gramps colored and pulled on the neck of his T-shirt. “That one might be more problematic. Hate to say it, but she does technically own that stretch of, what is it, twenty yards long and three feet in? Shoot. What I wouldn’t give to go back in time, before I was born, and make sure my Pops measured right when he made that wall.”

The wall that functioned like a fence was beautiful—a mosaic of stony faces. Shale rocks, most of them on the flatter side, had been stacked to form a dry stone wall, fit together by the natural shapes of the rocks. No mortar or cement had been used. Years and years of hard labor, when his great grandfather couldn’t afford materials for anything sturdier than a wire fence. It had even been featured on some Idaho home show on TV one time. It was impressive. And a few years ago, Cynthia Hughes had discovered that it technically encroached on her land. She owned a twenty-yard stretch of it, and had even fought to have that section of the wall taken down.

A wall like that. Taken down? The Wades weren’t the only ones who thought she was crazy for asking that.

But then, when Gramps went over to offer her another piece of the property, acreage that bordered hers but just further east, she took it.

“That piece of property you gave her as consolation ... Was that on the books or sort of a side thing?”

Gramps laughed despite the sober moment. “Wes. Who do you think I am? Do you think I would have done that on the side? You can call the city right now. I filed the paperwork for

that donation. Gift, my foot.” He shook his head. “I didn’t mind giving Cynthia that piece of land. And I did feel bad that Pops had done such a poor job of measuring. I mean, the wall took years to build. You get sloppy when you’re trudging around the property carrying stones. There wasn’t anyone living on Cynthia’s parcel back then. None of the outbuildings or the house even existed. And with the way the ground had eroded, you know, it was an easy mistake to make.”

“So, you can prove that you gave Cynthia the piece of land to make up for the fact that Pops was off in his measurements, what, fifty years before? But technically, Cynthia does own that land the fence veered over into, right? Is the county aware that the two are connected? Or does it just look like we are still encroaching on her property?”

Gramps lifted a shoulder, then pushed the button on the side of his recliner so that the footrest would go down. It was almost comical how long it took. Almost.

“You know, there was a time when Cynthia and I were friends,” Gramps said. “She and your grandma got along fine. Oh, they were opposites in a lot of ways. But you know Grandma could become friends with the stranger passing through, stopping at Food ‘N’ Friends, as easily as with people she’d been going to church with her whole life.” Gramps smiled at the memory. “But those little problems with the property were all straightened out a few years ago. We’d gotten along fine. No complaints. She’d bring me food when she had extra. And she even gave me some pointers on English riding—to rid me of that awful Western style that grated on her nerves so much.”

Gramps’s gaze was wistful, and in another universe and time, Weston could have guessed that Gramps had a soft spot in his heart for Cynthia Hughes.

What in the actual crap?

Before he could dwell on this impossible impossibility, Gramps continued on. “Okay, so we can manage the property line thing because we can show that we did take measures to resolve the issue and that she signed off on it. And we can

manage the goats in the wrong place thing. Do you see any goats there anymore? No.” He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Paperwork. That one may be tricky. But these things do not, in any way shape or form make the ranch an unsuitable place for the girls in the program. I just wish I knew why Cynthia was doing this.”

“The zoning laws stuff and property line stuff may not mean the place isn’t fit for Rise Up. But she mentioned other stuff.”

At first, Gramps didn’t get it, but when his scowl turned softer, his eyes grew wide. “You can’t be serious. She’s bringing up stuff from when you were a kid?”

“I was fifteen and drinking and—” There it went again, the feeling that he couldn’t ever quite run fast enough to get out of the grasp of the biggest regrets of his life.

“You were a minor, which is a problem. And you know that. You’ve spent every day since then repaying that debt. And as far as I’m concerned, you’re perfectly square. You’ve completely changed. Anyone with half a brain can see that. Besides, you were a *minor*,” Earl repeated. “Which means that’s not on public record.”

“Not my record as an adult, but I’m guessing it can be brought up in situations like this.”

“Wes, this isn’t right. You’re not a danger to the girls. You’re not a danger to anyone. It’s just—”

But Weston saw it. A fear in Gramps’s expression. Trial by public opinion. Cynthia Hughes didn’t need to prove anything. Enough talk around town would take care of that for her. Then she wouldn’t have to worry about a program to help at-risk girls being next door.

Weston stepped up to the kitchen and pulled out a glass from the cupboard by the sink. He filled it with water and tried to drink it, but he could only take a sip before his stomach turned.

“She did say something else that I wasn’t sure I understood. Something about defamation?”

“Defamation? Is that what she’s calling it? There was never anything documented. I wasn’t charged with anything.”

“Gramps?” Weston warned. “Start talking.”

“She wrote me a letter a few years ago. Stuck it in the mailbox at the end of the lane. She wrote in the letter that she’d heard I’d made comments to some of her customers about her, disparaging her character. Wes, I didn’t. One time, a couple had come in from out of town to purchase a horse. Fancy racehorse and worth a lot of money. They were from back east somewhere. Cynthia got the dates wrong or something, and she’d gone to visit her sister for the weekend. When they couldn’t find her, they came here. At first, they were upset, but your old Gramps—” He stuck a thumb to his chest. “I diffused the situation. Brought them into the house. Gave them something to eat and drink.”

“Probably talked their ear off.”

“What? I’ve lived a rich life. There are a lot of stories in this noggin of mine.”

“Yeah, I know. How did you defame Cynthia’s character then?”

“I didn’t. I mean, she wasn’t my favorite person at the time because she was just so finicky. One minute bringing me a pot pie, and the next ignoring me at the grocery store. So, I probably commiserated with them a little about her missing the appointment. But that was it. The reason she lost their business was because she made a mistake. Not me. I brought them in and helped them out. They seemed grateful, and we had a nice visit. They left, and I never heard from them again. A few days later, Cynthia called to get my side of the story. She got upset, telling me I’d defamed her character, and then I got the letter in the mailbox. That’s it.”

“So, she never made an official claim against you?”

“Not that I ever heard of.”

They were silent for a long time. Weston’s gut ached for Ruby. He was responsible for this problem.

“And about the other matters,” Gramps said. “When you were a kid and, you know ... you were just an angry kid at the time. I forgave you for that, and we moved on. I can’t believe she won’t do the same.”

“The thing is, what if I *shouldn’t* be here at the ranch around the girls.”

“Wes, it was petty theft, a bottle of beer, and a little vandalism. Years ago.”

Weston let out a long, slow breath, his heartbeat throbbing in his head. “I’m not sure any of that matters.” He reached for his jacket and slung it through his arms, grabbing his keys from the counter in the process.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to talk to Ruby.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ruby and Mabel were playing a card game, something they wouldn't have normally done on a weeknight, with both of them working and Mabel in nursing school. She was so busy that she barely knew her own name sometimes.

But Ruby had called Mabel on her drive home from the meeting, telling her about the encounter with Cynthia Hughes. And Mabel showed up twenty minutes later with a pack of cards and some candy to use as bargaining chips.

Together, they tried to come up with a scenario where Weston wasn't a criminal.

"He passed the background check, though!" Mabel insisted. "I refuse to believe that if it's really true that he did all that bad stuff, our legal system is so out of it that they'd say it would be okay for him to be around the kids and work with them."

"I don't understand it. But I do know that he's not denying anything Cynthia said."

"Cynthia is a problem, and everyone knows it. She's just been so lonely since her husband died that she gets bored and has to conjure up trouble."

"I want to say that's it. But what if it's not? And isn't that unfair of us to just automatically assume she's trying to drum up fake issues to add spice to her life? If someone accused me of that instead of really listening and getting to the bottom of everything, I'd be really frustrated and hurt. You know, women aren't believed nearly enough."

“I hear you on that,” Mabel said, popping a chocolate candy in her mouth. “I have felt, at times, that she gets a bad rap more often than she deserves it.”

Mabel nodded. “So, do you think Weston managed to do all those crimes in one crazy night? Or was this spread out over years? And what did he vandalize? I’m so curious.” Mabel grabbed her phone from the table and began typing rapidly.

“You’re not telling the others about this, are you? I want to wait until I figure out what’s going on.”

“Of course not. I’m Googling him.”

“Mabel. I haven’t even done that.”

“What? Why not? That’s like dating one-oh-one.”

“I definitely did when I was dating from that app. But I don’t know. Weston’s different.”

Mabel cooed. “Oh my gosh, you’re such a goner. You love him.”

Ruby scrunched up her face, and let out a short, hot breath. “How can I love him? I didn’t even know he had a criminal record. Or maybe he was never charged, and that’s why there’s not a record for him on file—like he did all those things like she’s saying he did but wasn’t formally charged?” She groaned and eased her head onto her hands on the table. “Mabel. Help.”

Mabel reached for Ruby’s head and rubbed it gently, pulling the hair back from her hairline. “I know, sweetheart. I know. Love hurts. Unanswered questions hurt. But he just might be worth it in the end. Don’t give up on things yet.”

You love him, echoed in Ruby’s mind. Did she? If love was thinking about them all the time, feelings for him melting inside her like freshly whipped cream on her tongue. He was just always there, a brief second away in her mind. When they were apart, the need grew stronger. No doubts. Just need. A need to love him and be loved by him.

She knew he loved well. Any woman would be lucky to be loved by Weston Wade. Except those accusations? A shiver went down her spine.

She heard a knock at the door. But it was a little before ten, and Ruby knew enough from cases at work that she didn't want to answer the door. Mabel held up her hands. "I don't mind answering it for you, but ... that's your call."

Ruby shook her head and then looked away, twisting her hair back and piling it high on her head. A moment later, her phone dinged with a text from Weston.

Can I talk to you?

She was like the sixth-grader who'd read her diary aloud to the entire high school football team, standing on her head, wearing a dress that fell over her face. She got up from the table, flashing Mabel a big smile. "Teeth check. Do I have any candy in there?"

"You're in the clear," Mabel said importantly. "Is it Weston?"

Ruby nodded, every nerve ending on fire.

She let Weston in without so much as a word. The tension between them muddied up the atmosphere in the room.

Mabel stood and began gathering the cards. "I better get going. I have a test tomorrow."

Ruby rushed to her side. "You don't have to go yet. I had a really good hand."

"Which is why I have to go now ... *with* the cards," Mabel teased. She shoved everything in a little tote bag and then gave Ruby a hug. She gave a half-hearted salute to Weston. "Weston, keep it real, okay? She's a good egg."

"She most certainly is." But Weston's slight smile didn't reach his eyes. Ruby's heart stopped again, briefly but clearly. Oh, yes sir, this was serious.

After Mabel left, Ruby motioned to the couch, and they sat. She felt like one of those mutes on *The Hunger Games*. No words could come out of her mouth because her tongue

had been ripped out of her. She curled her legs up to her chest so that she could wrap her arms around her legs.

Weston reached out a hand to slide his finger down her cheek “You are so beautiful it almost hurts.”

“Hurts?”

“It almost hurts because you’re ... you’re just everything.” A groan escaped him and he dropped his hand. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek. “I really, really like you, Weston.”

He moved away from her, like he’d been splattered with hot oil. “There’s a lot I need to tell you. Things I should have told you before.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve told you the reason I came to live here with Grandma and Gramps was because I was having a hard time. And that’s true, but maybe not in the way you’d think.”

“Okay,” she said again. What had he done? Had he truly changed?

“I didn’t want to be like my dad,” Weston said.

“That’s not a crime.”

He shot out a taut breath. “I haven’t gotten there yet, hold up.”

“Sorry.”

“I was in that rebellious stage, you know, the one that says, ‘Well, if Dad says not to drink or hang out after midnight, or whatever, I’m just going to go do those things. Because.’” He gave a half-hearted shrug. “Because rebellion felt kind of good.”

“Okay.” She was back to the okays. Where were her counseling skills? She used them in her job every day. Why did they suddenly seem to have abandoned ship?

“It didn’t hurt—or help, depending on how you look at it—that some neighbor kids had discovered their parents’ alcohol stashes and had plenty of opportunities to raid them.” He met her gaze. “Ruby, I promise you, I haven’t had any alcohol since that summer. I didn’t trust myself around it for a long time, but for the past few years, it’s been because the appeal of it has gone away. I don’t want it anymore. I used it to really screw up my life; why would I want it?”

Ruby’s middle hurt. It was dead weight pulling her down, down, down.

“But I did back then. And my explaining how I feel about drinking now doesn’t excuse what I did back then. I did some vandalizing with those kids. I stole some stuff from the sporting goods store and a dollar store.”

“A dollar store? Classy.”

He gave a mirthless laugh. “Yeah. That’s me. Mr. Classy.”

“What could you possibly steal from a dollar store?”

He frowned, his face drawn with embarrassment. “Do you know how many five packs of baseball cards you can fit down your pants?”

“Not as many as you thought you could since you got caught?”

For the first time since everything had changed for them, she thought maybe she saw something of a smile from him.

“I did get caught. Went to juvie for a couple of days. Had to do community service. And when school got out for the summer, my parents sent me to the ranch.”

“Which didn’t thrill you, right?”

“I was ticked off. Anyway, my opinion that stealing, drinking, and vandalism were fun? That didn’t completely go away when I got here.”

“No. No you didn’t,” Ruby said, but she wished she could take it back because the look on Weston’s face was sheer agony.

“I did. Well, me and those Duncan brothers. What are their names?”

“Mack Duncan’s brothers? Oh, that’s just peachy.” Ruby huffed and rolled her eyes. “I’m sure that’s how you got the liquor, too, I’m guessing? Their names are Bridger and Hutch, by the way.”

“That’s right. And we spray-painted an old barn on Cynthia’s property because, of course, I had to go with wherever was closest. I’m nothing if not practical.” He paused, wondering “why?” for the thousandth time. “We got caught. Oh, and by the way, it wasn’t her nice, fancy, “cost double what I paid for my entire house” barns. We just chose a little old one in the corner. We thought no one would even notice for a long while.”

She placed a hand over her mouth. “Wow.” What else could she say?

“I am so sorry.” He pulled away from her then, his face stony and his body rigid.

“You were young and obviously hurting.” Ruby’s voice was calm. This was okay news. Not great news. But okay news. She could work with this. She’d heard a lot worse at work.

“Grandma and Gramps put me on a different trajectory, and I haven’t looked back since. I’m very grateful to them.” His voice caught, and he cleared his throat and squeezed his eyes shut. After a moment, he opened them again and looked at Ruby.

“But nothing can erase what I did. What I did back home in Wyoming and what I did to Cynthia’s barn, and just everything. Yeah, I don’t do that anymore. But does that matter? Her inquiries and complaints? They’re serious, Ruby.”

“I’m not too worried about it.”

“You’re not the one—” He sighed and sunk his forearms on his thighs. “You’re important to me. I don’t want to be without you, and I want to be able to help you with Rise Up. I really, really do.”

But. There was a but coming. And Ruby felt it coming the moment he walked in the room.

“I’m leaving Silver Plum.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Weston thought Kansas City, Missouri, looked completely different than he remembered it. Of course, he'd only been fifteen at the time. And he and his family had only spent time at the rodeo arena and a hotel back then.

They'd won the trip. It had been one of those radio promotions that his mom kept calling to win, so there was an extra air of excitement about going. Three full days in the roar, muscle, and fanfare of a world-class rodeo.

You could take the family out of the country, but you couldn't take the country out of the family. Not completely, anyway.

It had been a fun trip. The last thing they did together as a family before Weston was shipped off to Wade Ranch. He'd been to juvie. He'd felt remorse—a whole truckload of it. He'd talked to Jesus about it plenty by that point. He didn't want the life he'd found himself swept into. And, besides that little hiccup with the Duncan brothers? He hadn't gone back to that former life.

And then he pulled a bully off of an innocent kid, a girl of maybe ten or eleven, and it gave him power. He'd done it almost without thinking, jumping in and pulling the brute off her, getting a cut that required stitches in the process. But something about that experience reminded him that he still had something good inside of him. That instinct to help had to mean there was something good in him, right?

And now he was back in Kansas City. Well, just at the airport. And then the owner of the Tuskalooga Ranch near Platte City would be picking him up and taking him to his new life.

The man who picked him up looked far too young to be the owner of the ranch, more like a recent high school graduate. But the truck matched the description, and he seemed to know who Weston was.

“Nice to meet ya,” the kid said while pumping Weston’s arm. “Welcome to Missouri. We appreciate you coming. Dad couldn’t make it, so I’m here to get you.”

Well, if everyone was as nice as this kid, then maybe this was going to be alright.

But as he drove to his new life, the dread began to sink in. He stared out the window at the city as it slowly turned to farmland. Heartland USA right here, and Weston was looking forward to a fresh start, where his past didn’t harm the people he cared about.

Or the person he loved.

What was the old saying? He’d made his bed; now he had to lie in it? Well, it was a stale, fourteen-year-old, foolish, selfish bed. And lying in it meant leaving the ranch behind. And Gramps. And Ruby.

But maybe, like when he was in Kansas City before, he could find something redeemable about this situation...or about himself.

Was there anything redeemable about him? His past had come back to haunt him in the worst way imaginable: in the form of harming the woman he loved.

Maybe there was no coming back from that.

Chapter Twenty-Six

If Ruby had a dollar for every time the need to relieve herself got in the way during difficult things, she'd be able to buy her own ranch.

Wow. That would be nice. A place for Rise Up that was all her own, no need to lease someone else's property.

No need to be a victim of some ill-timed inquiries into the character of the man she loved and his sweet grandfather.

Okay, now she needed to use the ladies' room for its intended purpose *and* grab some tissues while she was at it because she felt the waterworks coming up again.

Weston left a couple of weeks before. Something about causing too much trouble and being in the way of the success of the program.

Baloney.

Ruby believed it at first. That he was trying to do the noble thing and get out of the way so that most of what Cynthia Hughes had brought forth could be removed, and they'd have more of a chance.

But as the days went on and preparations continued, a fear set inside Ruby's heart. Weston had left. Period. Did the reason matter so much?

He'd told her he'd be there with her and support her.

A single haunting of his past, and he's out of there?

Her body threatened to buckle. And it wasn't just the need to pee. That was just a very unfortunate reaction to when

things were hard. And standing outside Magda's office, things were definitely hard.

Before she could run down the hall and relieve herself, Magda opened the door, and several important looking people filed out.

She introduced Ruby to the members of the foundation's board. They'd come to discuss the allegations that had been brought up against the ranch and its owners.

Nice to meet yous abounded. Yes, the program does seem like a good thing, doesn't it? Thank you for your time.

All the formalities were in a vacuum until Ruby knew the outcome of their decision. It was like a thick panel of aquarium glass was between them, muffling sound and meaning.

Magda ushered Ruby into her office after they left, and still, Ruby couldn't read her expression.

"How did it go?" Ruby asked.

"It was a mixed bag, honestly." Magda pressed her fingertips into her cheekbones and sighed. "Here's the deal. The program itself? Airtight. No issues. You've been certified, you've got the supplies you need, and the participants have been notified and accepted. Everything's great there. But unfortunately, the board feels that you can't do the program at Wade Ranch. There just isn't enough evidence to show that Weston and Earl Wade can provide a safe environment for the girls. We have to have an abundance of caution here."

"I don't have another location. I've tried, Magda. This is all I have." *And this is all I want to have. The horses, the bunkhouse, the scenery, are all part of Rise Up now. It can't be done anywhere else.*

But she didn't say that to Magda.

"I know, Ruby. One of the board members suggested a location near Nampa that might work. It's more old military base barracks than ranch, but there is a corral and stables for horses. If we could rent some horses to use, that might be an option. But wherever you chose to house the program, this is

going to take time. More than we have. The board has decided to extend all of your permits and the funds and everything until next year. They're putting a hold on everything, so we can work on this next year. We'll find a place, Ruby. It's going to be okay."

"So, there's no way this can be retracted? Nothing we can do?" Words spilled out of Ruby's mouth even before she could measure them. "The program was supposed to start in a matter of days. Weston Wade has moved. And as far as Earl is concerned, that's a non-issue. The defamation claims? Never filed, and they're not an issue. The property lines and zoning? Any obstacle involving those things has been resolved for years. With Weston gone, I don't see why we can't move forward at Wade Ranch."

"I agree with you." Magda's dark eyes effused kindness. "That all sounds good. But I'm not the board. And they can't do anything that even remotely looks like they're supporting a subpar location for this project."

Subpar? Weston and Wade Ranch were anything but subpar. Yeah, he'd ditched her and the project, and she hadn't heard a word from him since. But he was a good man with integrity and honor. Whatever he was doing by leaving, he was doing it because he thought it would be better that way.

When Ruby pulled up to the main house at Wade Ranch, she spotted Gramps immediately. He was spraying down some muddy, rusty equipment off to the side of a barn, his expression gleeful. Give a man, any man, a big hose and a water source, and he's happy for days.

Ruby thought of what Weston's expression might be like if he were the one to be spraying off the equipment. Adorable. Giddy.

No. She had to stop this constant thinking about Weston. It was getting her nowhere fast. She couldn't come undone, especially now.

Gramps lifted a hand to wave and then clamped down the nozzle before setting the hose down and walking back to the utility building to turn the water off.

“I don’t mean to interrupt the cleaning.” Ruby smiled as she got out of her car, using her hand to shield her eyes from the sunlight. It had gotten warm the past couple of days. Just as she knew it would when the program was starting.

“No interruption. The cleaning is the interruption from what really matters in life, not the other way around.”

Ruby could only smile.

“The ranch hands Weston brought on, back from before, have been cutting the alfalfa. Just in time to get some up to the horses in the highlands.”

She’d told Weston she’d help him cut that down. What had he said? That she could drive the stack wagon?

“Why don’t you come on in, Ruby?”

“Oh, that’s okay. I just came by to give you the news. It looks like the foundation board has decided to postpone the program until next summer. Until a suitable location can be found.”

Gramps’s expression crumbled. “I’m real sorry about all this, Ruby. I knew we weren’t perfect by any means, but I thought we could provide a nice place for the girls to do some healing.”

“I know. And I don’t think there is a single thing wrong with the ranch. Or with you or Weston. It’s just one of those overabundance of caution things that they can’t ignore.”

“But aren’t the girls practically on their way? I’d sure hate for them to miss out.”

“My supervisor is looking for some alternative things they can get involved in this summer, things that are local to them and that the fees can be waived for. But yes, it’s going to be very difficult to tell them it’s been called off for a year.”

“So, they haven’t been told yet? But the board’s decision is final? Are you sure it’s final?”

The wheels were turning in Gramps's head so fast, Ruby wondered if his brain might break. Something was up.

"No, they haven't been told. That yucky task is mine. And it seems final. I mean, we're not dealing with the government, thank goodness. That would be inflexible and final, for sure. So much red tape. But this is a private foundation, so there are far fewer rules." She shook her head. "I need to stop dreaming. The board is on their way back to Boise now."

Gramps was thoughtful for a long time. "Have you heard from Weston?"

"No."

"He's been texting me regularly. Seems to like the ranch there. It's a larger operation than we've ever had, so he's been busy from sun up to sun down." Gramps's mouth dropped open. "Wait here a minute. I need to show you something." He turned to leave and then said, "If you can't come in, at least come sit on the porch out of the sun." He went inside and came back out with his phone.

"He texted me this picture last night. I guess he had to drive into town for some things and stopped by there for a photo op."

The photo was a little hard to see on Gramps's screen, but it was Weston alright. He was a good selfie taker, and the planes of his jaw and lips and nose were all perfectly balanced, noble and strong.

Be still my beating heart. I will never stop swooning at the sight of that man.

But I can't have that man, so I better step off.

"What's behind him? Does that say the Kansas City Rodeo Grounds?"

"Yes," Gramps said. "He went there as a teen once. My daughter-in-law won a trip on a radio program. Great opportunity for that family. My wife and I were tickled pink for 'em."

“Oh.” Wheels began turning in her own head, memories of things he’d told her about the time he’d saved someone at a rodeo ...

“In fact, I dug up this old photo. My daughter digitized all my old photos for me for Christmas a couple of years ago. Organized them. She made it easy to find any picture I want right here on my phone.” He scrolled and pressed a few things on his screen and then turned it over to her.

“It’s your wife.”

“Yeah, isn’t she a beauty? This has nothing to do with the conversation we’re having. Just wanted to show her off.”

Ruby’s throat thickened. “Louise really was a beauty. I’m sure you miss her very much.”

His tongue darted out as he moistened his lips. “More than I could have ever imagined.” He lost himself in thought for a moment, then shook his head. “But here, this is what I wanted to show you. I sent this to Weston this morning. Thought it would be fun for him to remember when he was down there before.”

There, on Gramps’s screen was a picture of the guy who’d saved her from her mean cousin, Monica, all those years ago.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

How was Ruby going to tell Weston that they did actually know each other from before? And not really in a “we’re soulmates, so we’ve always known each other” way, but more of a “you thought you were saving me, but it was just my cousin being dumb” way.

How did one even do that? And what if he didn’t agree? But that picture of him at the rodeo. That was definitely the boy who’d helped her and taken one for the team as Monica threw one last nasty punch.

She knew that her protector and Weston were one and the same. And now that she knew, she wondered how she hadn’t realized it before? Because those eyes in that photo, the hairline, and the way he positioned his chin, everything pointed to him. It was so obvious now. And as she thought back to that moment, when she was twelve, she didn’t think he’d ever said much to her, so it’s not like she would have remembered his voice.

Not that his voice would even sound the same as his fifteen-year-old self.

The wonder of it all had her reeling. But she couldn’t think about that now.

In a list of just plain weird things, this would definitely go at the top. They didn’t meet all the times he visited her tiny hometown? But they happened upon each other thousands of miles away in Missouri, in a chance meeting where he stepped in to be her hero?

Not that she'd needed him necessarily. She'd had it in the bag. It wasn't the first or last time Monica fought her, and Ruby could hold her own.

Her thoughts shifted to the task at hand: trying to save the program from impending postponement.

Last-ditch effort. No one could accuse Ruby of giving up, right? If this all failed, at least she knew she wouldn't slink into the shadows when all signs pointed to failure.

She sat on Gertrude, the yellow mare with the silky black mane and tail. "Good girl," she said softly, patting Gertrude's neck. This horse was the most docile of the bunch, so sweet. Ruby turned to look behind her to make sure the mountains were in view, and things looked good.

I won't think of Weston, she told herself again, then took her phone out of a small pouch on the thin blanket underneath the saddle. Gramps stood just out of view, ready to help if needed. Ruby could ride. She wasn't in the same league as the Wades, but she could hold her own. Still, holding the phone and the reins at the same time could be tricky, even while standing still, as she fully intended to.

"Ready?" she asked Gramps.

"Well, I'm ready, but I'm not the one doing the live video," he said. "Are you ready?"

She nodded and grinned, then pushed the record button on her phone. "I'm Ruby Garza, and I'm here at Wade Ranch, outside the beautiful small town of Silver Plum in Idaho. And this is Gertrude. Say hi, Gertrude!" Ruby laughed, maybe a little too much. Something about knowing people were watching made her crack up more than she would have in any other situation. "I'm the founding director of Rise Up, a program designed to help at-risk teen girls as they fight to heal from the traumatic events in their lives. And Gertrude here represents an integral part of how this program will be a success. Equine-assisted therapy has been proven to reduce stress and symptoms of PTSD. And I want nothing more than to give teen girls the opportunity to engage in equine-assisted therapy, as well as many other modalities outlined in our

research-based program, of which I'm a trained facilitator." She took a deep breath. "So, the reason I'm doing this video today is we have just lost our ability to use these beautiful facilities. As it's just days before when the program was supposed to start, I've been told we will have to cancel this year's program and hold off until next year."

She placed a hand on her heart. Maybe if she pressed there, it wouldn't hurt so much. "I am very disappointed, but I feel all things will work out how they're meant to. And that's why I'm talking to you today, because if by some miracle, there are facilities somewhere that we could use instead, a ranch or farm with horses, I'm pleading with you to allow us to do that? I'm just so—"

Gertrude suddenly reared up on her hind legs and neighed, and Ruby held on for dear life, her heart jamming her throat. She squeezed Gertrude's middle with her knees and prayed she wouldn't be bucked off.

Gramps came running. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, Gertrude." He grabbed the reins and spoke softly, "There now, there now." She went back on her four feet. "Good girl," Gramps said.

Once the danger had passed, Ruby could breathe again. "What happened?"

"She probably saw a snake. I was too busy focusing on you to notice what spooked her. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Glad I didn't end up on my rear end in that pile of poop right there. Oh no. Oh no, no, no..."

"What? What's wrong?"

"My phone." She pointed to the horse's excrement and to the phone that was halfway immersed in it." Two opposing forces—should she laugh or should she cry—were at work. She got the giggles and couldn't stop. Gramps joined right in with her.

"I can't believe it! I wonder what that looked like on the video being broadcast to the world," she said between peals of laughter. "Not that the whole world follows me, but you get the idea."

“I bet that was something else to witness from the screen. People are going to be wondering what happened to you.” He led Gertrude away from the steaming pile that contained Ruby’s phone, then handed Ruby the reins and he walked back, shook his head, and pulled it out.

“That is totally disgusting,” Ruby cried.

“I can’t venture an affirmative answer, but it looks like it’s off and not turning back on yet. The screen doesn’t seem cracked or anything ...”

“How can you tell? It’s completely covered!”

“I’m used to horse droppings, Ruby. How about I wipe it off for you, and then you can figure out if it needs a bag of rice or a professional of some kind to bring it back to life. And then you’ve got to get back on to whatever social media you were on and let everyone know you’re okay. I bet you have a lot of concerned people out there.”

She nodded and quickly responded before the giggles could overtake her again. “Sounds good.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Before the live stream ended, Weston had been mesmerized by Ruby sitting up on Gertrude, Ruby's hair lifting in the breeze. He recognized the exact spot she was sitting in, and a flash of homesickness flared within him.

Gramps, the ever-watchful grandfather he was, let him know that Ruby was doing a live video on social media. He told Weston not to ask him which one because he had no idea, but he did know it was starting in a half-hour, and Weston should tune in.

And like a glutton for punishment, that's exactly what Weston did. He got on early, in fact, so that when her beautiful face came into view, his heart plunged down to his feet, and he was filled with every emotion under the sun. Regret and desire being the strongest.

And then, when the phone went flying, and he saw Ruby's hair fan out like she'd been tipped over, he lost all sense.

Then, her live stream ended. Helpless, he felt fear drift in. Was she okay? Had she been bucked off?

Please let her be okay, God. Please?

Why had she done it while sitting on Gertrude? She was the oldest horse they had and the most docile, but to try to do a live video while sitting on a horse? Where was Gramps in all this? Why had he let her do that?

It took three calls for Gramps to pick up.

"Are you there with Ruby? What happened? She got bucked off." He breathed into the phone, static coming up.

“Slow down, Wes. She’s fine. Gertrude reared up and scared Ruby, but she held on, and she’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

It took several seconds for that to sink into his head. She was okay.

“Why did you let her do that? You just stood there and let her do a video while sitting on a horse. She’s not experienced enough, Gramps.”

Gramps only chuckled, which soon became true laughter, and then Weston was just plain mad.

“What’s funny now, Gramps?” If he had a post to hit his own head into over and over again, he would.

“Oh, nothing.” But his voice didn’t convey ‘nothing.’ “I think you’d better come home, Weston.”

There was a long pause as Weston tried to sort out what his Gramps meant by that. Finally, Weston sighed. “You know I can’t. I have obligations to the ranch here.”

“Well, I understand that. Of course, I don’t want you to shirk your responsibilities. But you know Ruby’s program? It’s not happening here. So, there’s no reason for you to stay away. You aren’t going to scare anyone by being here, so if you want the ranch back, it’s yours.”

“I don’t know, Gramps.”

“That’s fine. Just think about it. Keep your options open.”

“I don’t know what to say. I ... I messed things up for her.”

“You didn’t, Wes. It’s just one of those things. We can’t control other people. And I say you’ve done a fine job of living an upstanding life for all of your adulthood. Stop beating yourself up over things you’ve already put to rest. You’ve gotta let go.”

“That’s kind of hard to do when others bring it up like it happened yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about Cynthia. I’m going to talk to her.”

“You don’t have to do that, Gramps. Please.”

“She’s harmless.” At Weston’s sound of disbelief, Gramps laughed. “Well, she is. She’s just been through a lot of stuff. I’ll set her straight.”

Weston figured Gramps being able to talk some sense into Cynthia was about as likely as a goat learning to line dance, but hey, if Gramps wanted a death wish, no one could stop him.

Weston got off the phone with Gramps, his heart squeezing into itself. Seeing Ruby again opened up parts of him that he’d shut down these past couple of weeks. He’d had his nose to the grindstone, working so hard there wasn’t time to think of her.

Except that wasn’t true. He had thought of her. And of seeing her again and hearing her voice.

He bumped a snort from his chest at thinking of how crazy she’d been to try to film herself talking and sitting on a horse at the same time.

That woman. He shook his head, and even before he finished the thought, he knew he’d never be the same again. He just couldn’t figure out what to do about it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“**A**ll right, let’s try this one more time.” Ruby smiled mischievously. With a dash of humiliation, she pressed her fingertips to her forehead. “Everybody, that was embarrassing. I dropped my phone during the last video, and it wasn’t pretty. The horse had gotten spooked, just a little, but my phone landed in ... you guessed it ... horse dung! So, that’s what took me so long. I had to disinfect this thing and, guess what? It still works! It’s a Wade Ranch miracle. Anyway, I’m back now, but this time, I’m in a more secure location. I’m much safer now.” She laughed and looked around the room and tapped a wall. “This is inside the beautiful Wade Ranch.” She turned the view of the camera around, so the viewers could see it. “I wanted to finish up my little spiel here, and then I’ll let you go on with your day. Like I was saying, my program for at-risk teen girls called Rise Up needs a new location. As beautiful as this place is, it’s not going to work out to have it here. So, we need your help. If anyone has any place that might work, please contact me. I know personally the power of nature, of vast, open spaces, of growing alfalfa and cows and horses and goats. There’s a real magic here. It’s a healing magic. And I’ve seen the by-product of the ranching life in someone who is very dear to me. He came here when he was hurting, wounded. And after just a few short weeks, he’d changed, through hard work, the horses, just all of it. I want to give that opportunity to these girls, too.”

Ruby finished the video and then pocketed her phone. What more could she do? Except sit there and pine after a man who’d left.

She walked along the corridor, looking at the photographs of the Wade grandchildren. Weston was uncommonly cute, with his large eyes and tufts of hair curling around his ears.

Wandering further into the sprawling house, she saw the bunkhouse through the window. Instead of just sitting there, she could be productive and go do some finishing work on the paint.

She worked far into the night, wondering what Weston was doing, wishing he was there with her. The thought of what might have been felt like acid inside her. The girls would have been staying right there in a matter of days. There could have been so much done to help them, to ease their fears, to teach them emotion regulation and calming techniques.

And what might have been up with Weston? She had no idea. She knew the feelings had been strong between them ... she'd felt it in her gut. But now? Who knew how he felt now?

She did wish she could tell him about the surprise she'd discovered, though. That was incredible. The most unlikely story. She shivered at all of the forces that had had to combine to make that a reality.

Finally, she ran out of paint, and there was nothing to do but go home.

When she went inside, she found Gramps in his recliner. She tiptoed past him, noticing his chest moving up and down in a calm pattern. He was asleep.

Every muscle in her body ached, and she was yawning more and more frequently.

She padded down the long hallway that had the photos of the grandkids and then into the sitting room with the Ansel Adams wall hangings.

She had two thoughts before she drifted off to sleep. First, had anyone famous slept on this couch a long time ago? And, why can't Weston Wade be by her side right now?

It wasn't morning yet. It couldn't be because it was still dark outside. But there was movement in the room. Nothing scary, just ... right. Normal. Probably Earl. She could have opened her eyes, but it wasn't worth the effort.

Where was she, again? That's right. She fell asleep at Wade Ranch. A dash of sadness overtook her, and she shifted to bury her head in the throw pillow. She would have been staying here twenty-four-seven with the girls. And with Weston. Not *with* with Weston. But in the same vicinity, which would have been fine. More than fine, it would have been perfect.

She sunk into sleep once more, and a while later, she felt it again. Or rather, smelled a desirable combination of musk and Dial soap. Did Earl use the same soap Weston did?

Rubbing her eyes, she sat up, needing to fix her bra strap because, ouch, wearing an underwire while sleeping was all sorts of wrong.

"Ruby." Weston's voice was soft and gentle.

She clutched the blanket to her throat. "Weston? I've gotta be dreaming." She felt her lips curve up with a half-smile, her mind drunk with sleep, but her body perfectly alert to Weston's presence.

Her vision no longer sleep blind, she saw him in the doorframe, resting his back against it. "You look tired," she said.

"Me? You're the one who looks tired."

She ran a finger through her hair. Yep. Rat's nest quality hair going on right now. And what she wouldn't give for a toothbrush. "Well, I should be. I crashed on your couch without intending to, somewhere between the hours of midnight and one ... ish?"

He smiled, and everything in her flipped upside down. If it was just his smile, she'd be fine. Strong even, but everything in his face was attuned to her, and she was a total goner. Completely done.

"Want to have a seat?" She patted the cushion next to her.

He thanked her and sat, his gaze lazily taking her in.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “That ranch in Missouri called. They want you back.” She giggled at her stupid joke and then sobered. She shouldn’t be allowed to try to make jokes when she was this out of it.

Weston smiled before yawning. “Laughing at your own jokes is one of my favorite things about you.”

But she backed away from him then because he wasn’t allowed to be nice to her. He’d left, legit moved away.

“I took a redeye into Salt Lake, and then I drove up in a rental. Ruby, I had to see you. I watched your live stream.”

Embarrassment fluttered through her. “Which one?”

“Both. Gramps told me about them.”

She shook her head. “I should have known.”

“I thought Gertrude threw you off. I was out of my mind with worry. Gramps calmed me down, and then I realized something very important.”

He reached out a hand to her, and his eyes pleaded with her to please let him touch her.

She sat still, locked in his gaze, not knowing anything anymore but that yes, she did want him to touch her. She gave him a small nod, but letting out a slow breath.

He touched the side of her face, softly, and she leaned into it, the roughness of his hand drawing her in. “What did you realize?”

He gave a low chuckle, and she closed her eyes.

“I realized I love you, Ruby. Ever since we met, I’ve felt like I’ve known you since ... I don’t know, since before. I can’t explain it. And I just—”

Cue the record-scratching noise. Suddenly Ruby’s mind felt the same amount of awake as her body did. “Actually, I *can* explain that.” Even though her heart began to gallop, she would address that he said “love” later.

His head tilted back. “What?”

“Um, well. You know your trip to the rodeo grounds in Kansas City? When you were fifteen?”

“Yeah?” he said slowly.

“That happened to fall on the same weekend as my trip to the very same rodeo grounds when I was twelve.”

His eyes narrowed, and he cocked his head as if he had to analyze her to see if his gut was right. Comprehension dawned. “That was you? That was you.”

He leaned down to rest his forearms on his thighs, whispering a Biblical swear. “Wait. That girl was, like, ten, though.”

“I was a late bloomer, okay? I was twelve, guaranteed.”

“How did you figure that out?” Every word was laced with surprise.

“Gramps showed me a photo of you standing in front of the rodeo grounds, both a few weeks ago and back then, and everything came tumbling into place.”

“So, I saved you? That was you that I saved?”

“Hold on a minute. I hadn’t needed to be saved. You do understand it was just my horrible cousin, Monica, right?”

“I don’t care who it was. She was beating the snot out of you.”

“No! She was not. We were always like that. Us Garzas? We’re a very physical family.”

“I got that.”

“What? What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “When you do things, you do them with your whole body. It’s another one of my favorite things about you.”

Ruby didn’t know whether to be offended or take it as a compliment.

“Monica never actually hurt me for real. She was mean. She’s still mean. But it wasn’t like she ever left bruises. She’d

just walk up to me and punch me in the arm or whatever. And then when she got mad, yes, she would hit.” Ruby knew her family situation left something to be desired, especially her extended family. There was probably a whole lot of stuff surrounding the way the cousins treated each other that might be good to bring up in therapy eventually because the way it sounded was actually worse than she’d ever realized.

Weston shook his head as if to clear it. “But I feel like my whole concept of that experience has been turned on its head, and I need to talk this out.”

“Go ahead; I’m all ears. I’ll be your processor.”

“So, you never saw me as someone who ... saved you?” He glanced at her in an almost shy way.

“What is it with guys and wanting to save everyone?”

“It’s in our genetic makeup. Feeling like the hero, feeling like we’ve overcome all odds. It’s just ... I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Okay, I guess. Zane has said the same thing before.”

“Zane’s the firefighter, right?”

Ruby nodded. “So, I have to be honest about something. There was a small part of me that was glad you saved me.”

He grunted a laugh. “You said I didn’t save you. I’m so confused.”

“I mean, you threw my cousin off me and got a big cut above your eye in the process. Even though I didn’t think I needed it, I guess you could say I actually did appreciate it.”

“So, you’re saying you needed me, even when you didn’t think you would?” His glance teased her.

“Yeah.” Try as she might, she couldn’t suppress her smile.

“I’m back to feeling like a hero, thank you. I remember when you took a tissue from your pocket and pressed it to the cut above my eye.”

“I remember that, too. Then you squeezed my hand for a second. To thank me, I guess.”

He reached for her, and she laughed and moved out of his reach. They rolled on the couch, and Ruby ended up with the upper hand. “Tell me why you’re here, for reals.” Her hair hung over one eye and her breathing rate increased.

“Ruby. I’m sorry I left. It was a mistake to leave for Missouri when I could have just stayed nearby. But I guess it took being away from you and seeing you on that live video. Then you fell, or at least it looked like you fell, and something snapped.” He pushed a lock of her hair out of her eyes and pressed a kiss on her forehead. “I’m here now. And I don’t want to cause trouble with the board or with Magda, so I’m going to go live in town in one of those loft apartments. Mack said I could sublease one from him for a couple months. Gramps said I could come back to the ranch when it’s okay to do so.”

“You’ve already gotten this all decided?”

“I don’t know what you want. But I know what I want. And I also know I can’t be here and ruin things with the program.”

Rise Up. The turmoil surrounding it was almost too much for Ruby to bear. “It’s not happening until next year.”

“I know. But just in case, I thought I’d lie low.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “This isn’t fair. It’s so messed up.”

“It’s alright. We’ll figure it out.” His mouth formed a thin line. “And Ruby? I want to let go of the past. I’ve spent a lot of time feeling like the worst thing on the planet for what I did as a kid. I feel ready to be done with that.”

He reached for her hand and kissed her knuckle softly. “Something about being here on the ranch, helping Gramps, even if that means helping him close it down and sell it off.” He lifted a shoulder. “It doesn’t matter as much anymore. What matters to me is being the kind of man you deserve and living in the present, not living with this ugly chip on my shoulder.”

“I like your shoulders, chip and all.” Her teeth grabbed at her lip. “But I’m so glad you finally see it.”

“See what?”

Her lips curved up. “That you’re allowed to forgive yourself.”

“I want to. I really do.” His eyes grew a little watery and he cleared his throat. She yawned, and he tugged her closer. Being there, on this comfortable sofa, she felt complete. She never wanted this to end.

“I want to kiss you,” he murmured in her hair.

“And I want a toothbrush first.”

“I don’t care about that.”

She moved back. “But I do!”

“I’m sure there’s a toothbrush around here that you can use.” He began kissing her cheek, just below the eye, and then trailed down onto her neck, finishing by kissing her collarbone.

“Find one, and my lips are yours.”

He made quick work of that challenge, coming back with an unopened toothbrush and toothpaste.

She grinned so big, her cheeks hurt. “This is seriously the most romantic thing you’ve ever done for me,” she said before turning into the hall bathroom.

One of his brows rose. “More romantic than the cheeseburgers?”

“It’s a toss-up.”

Ruby and Weston took advantage of all the hard work they’d put into freshening up. It was nice to know that the toothpaste company was living up to its promises because they certainly put the product to the test.

After a long while, the kissing slowed to a sweet, tender end. Weston slung an arm around Ruby’s shoulder, and she fit perfectly by his side.

“Weston, I’m happy you’re back. Please don’t ever leave again.”

A shadow crossed his face. "I wish I didn't have to do this. But there's somewhere I need to be."

Ruby drew back. "I literally just asked you not to leave." She smiled, but there was an undercurrent of worry. What was wrong now?

"I know." He kissed her forehead. "Hopefully, it won't take long. I wish I could tell you more about it, but that's going to have to wait."

"I'll just keep working on things here." She sighed and ran a hand through the ends of her hair. "It probably sounds silly of me, but I want to keep getting things ready. I know it's not happening until next year. I don't know ... I just can't leave things undone."

"It makes perfect sense to me." He kissed her again. "I'll be back as soon as I can." He stood, stretched his back, and then gazed at her again.

"And Ruby? Whether it's this year or next, this program is going to do so much good for so many people. Generations down the line, in fact. This is important, sacred stuff."

She felt her eyes grow misty, and she trapped her bottom lip between her teeth. "I think you're right."

Chapter Thirty

Weston's skull thrummed right along with the toddler's quacking shoes in the front lounge area of the Women and Children's Center. Squish quack, squish quack. He supposed it was meant to be cute. But considering how little sleep he'd gotten the night before, it was just plain annoying.

He'd written an email to Magda and an email to the foundation, although he had to guess which address to send it to, and it was probably wrong, and most definitely after hours. But he had to try. He'd also written an email while flying to Cynthia Hughes, apologizing again for the things he'd done to her property when he was a teen.

So far, the only response he'd gotten was from Magda, which was a terse, "I can meet with you at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow."

It was 9:00 a.m., and Weston didn't know at all what he was going to say. He'd probably start with thanking her for letting him come in, and then maybe a little pleading and begging to let the program go on. He knew that she wasn't a member of the foundation's board, so there was probably little she could do. But he wanted to explain his past personally.

Magda came out to the lounge herself, saying hello to several of the people there and telling the mother of the kid with squeaky shoes that she could meet with her in ten minutes.

Sorry to all the people in the lobby who have to continue listening to that for another ten minutes ... my bad.

Magda told him to take a seat, and before he could say a word, the inquisition started. “Why have you come this morning?” “Why now?” “How can you make sure these girls will be safe?” “How true are these accusations of Cynthia Hughes?”

That last question was the trickiest. “Well, there are bits and pieces of truth in each claim.” And then he began explaining the circumstances, finishing with, “It’s my word against Cynthia’s, I guess. And I can’t interpret her opinions or feelings about the matter, just tell you my experience and my own feelings. That’s all I can do. But please don’t let mine and my grandfather’s long ago missteps be the cause of the traumatized individuals coming to the ranch not getting to experience this. I can attest to what the ranch can do for someone. What work, horses, digging, and baling can do for the soul. What Ruby herself can do for the soul.”

That last night had him feeling especially vulnerable.

“This helps me understand things a lot better. Thank you, Weston. You know this isn’t my decision to make, but I’ll help all I can.”

“You will?”

“Weston, you should know that Cynthia Hughes retracted her letter last night.”

“She did? And you didn’t start with that?” His tone was breezy, but he wondered why she’d let him drone on and on.

“I apologize. I felt it was important to get your true feelings on the subject; hear your side of things.”

“What kind of impact does this have on the program? Can it still happen this year?”

Magda’s face clouded, and she lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. We’ve already canceled some food orders and told the assistant we’d hired to look for something else for the summer. We’ve told the girls and their parents it’s been postponed until next year, and some of them were not happy about that.”

“I’m sure they weren’t. But if you need my help to call them all back, I’ll do it. I can help with anything.” He

stiffened, remembering himself, and then held up his palms. “But you probably don’t want me around the situation, so in that case, I’ll just cheer you guys on from the sidelines.”

“Weston Wade,” Magda said, a hint of a smile on her lips. “Cynthia Hughes took back everything she said. She told us about the vandalism, which is serious. But it’s also been over thirteen years since that happened. And Ms. Hughes also explained in her retraction that the way you handled it back then was impressive. She felt you were sincerely sorry, and that you made efforts to pay for damages and repaint the barn. She said there’s nothing untoward about anyone in the Wade family. I even spoke to her by phone this morning, and it seems to all check out. Basically, she wasn’t truthful with us before, but she seems to be now.”

“That’s really good news.” He shot out a breath and then steepled his fingers to his mouth. He could hardly believe it. “Did she say why she did it?”

“She said it began as a worry about the teens potentially causing problems with her clientele. She also said she was blinded by the past and by a narrow lens. I don’t understand what she means exactly, but I guess I don’t need to. She explained that it also grew because of a personal and unfounded bias in reaction to Earl Wade and that she was sorry.”

“I can’t believe it.” He felt lighter. His soul actually felt lighter. “So, what does this mean?”

“It could mean nothing,” Magda said. “Or it could mean the board changes their mind. It doesn’t hurt that Ruby’s video has gone viral, with the cow pie and everything.” She shook her head, biting back a smile. “The foundation and the city are getting calls and emails from people vouching for Wade Ranch, the Wade family, and for Ruby herself. It’s been exciting to see.”

“That’s huge, right?”

“Who knows? I’m traveling to an emergency meeting with the board in about an hour. I’ll be in touch.” She stood and

opened the door to her office. “Excuse me, but I have clients waiting to see me.”

And Weston thought the squeaky shoes that echoed as he left the Center actually sounded kind of cute now. Maybe, just maybe, they had a fighting chance now.

Chapter Thirty-One

“**A**re you sure?” Ruby spoke into the telephone in the kitchen of Wade Ranch. She twirled the tightly coiled cord around her finger.

Yes, it was a landline and had a cord attached to it. So what? Wade Ranch was vintage, so there were all sorts of crazy things happening up in there.

Moments earlier, Gramps had hurried to the bunkhouse to tell Ruby she was wanted on the phone. When Magda couldn't get ahold of her, she'd called the ranch to try to track her down.

Magda laughed on the other end. “I am sure. You'll be receiving documentation from the foundation by email. But yes, in light of Cynthia Hughes's retraction, they've decided to go ahead with the program this year as planned. If we'd been dealing with the government, there's no way we could make such a fast one-eighty.” Magda paused, a smile in her voice. “But private foundations are more flexible.”

Ruby placed a hand over the receiver and whispered to Gramps, who was hunched over the bar, a question on his face. “Rise Up is back on again!”

His eyes widened, and he let out a whoop. Ruby couldn't help but hug him.

She and Magda spoke about some details, and then when all Ruby could do was let out a half squeal, half sigh, Magda finished the conversation. “I'll let you go. You have some parents to call.”

“Right. Yes,” Ruby breathed.

“But first, you should know that Weston Wade came to my office this morning before my meeting with the board,” Magda said. “He wasn’t aware that Ms. Hughes had taken it all back, and he’d come to vouch for you and your program. He wanted me to reconsider.”

So that’s where Weston had gone. That sly dog. But that had been hours ago. Where was he now?

“I wanted you to know that,” Magda said. “And for what it’s worth, I feel he’s a trustworthy person.”

Ruby thanked Magda and ended the call, her mind twisting every which way.

Gramps hollered again. “Congratulations, Ruby! Now let’s get back to work. The clock’s ticking and before we know it, it will be Rise Up time.”

She placed both hands over her nose and mouth. “I can’t believe it. Is this real?”

Gramps chortled. “Yes, it’s real. And why weren’t you answering your phone when Magda was trying to call you?”

“I’d gone off-grid. It’s one of the things that we would have taught the girls. Or—” she opened her mouth in wonder, “—what we *will* teach the girls. It’s so we can figure out how we work through our emotions when we no longer have this little device that is full of ways to numb out.”

“Well then, I was off-grid my whole life until my grandkids made me get a cell phone.” He shook his head.

“Wait, Gramps.” Ruby’s mind was still reeling. “Do you know anything about why Cynthia would say those terrible things and then take them all back? In a convincing enough way that the board is suddenly fine with everything?”

Gramps’s gaze went to the floor, and he was quiet for a beat. “I went over there yesterday and asked her that myself. I couldn’t understand why she was doing this. I wanted answers.” He scrubbed the back of his neck. “It was a personal thing, which she apologized for. And she surprised me.” He

worked his mouth, seeming uneasy. “She said ... well, she told me she used to have feelings for me a few years back. And when I didn’t show the same interest in her, she said she took it pretty hard. And then she told me that sort of messed with her ability to think clearly in these situations. She seemed genuinely sorry.” He shrugged, his mouth turning down.

This was all so bizarre. How could someone be that petty to take those charges and problems from the past and distort them like that?

“She’s quite the woman,” Ruby said. She couldn’t think of anything else to say about it. Here was yet another case of love doing strange things to a person. But whatever Cynthia had done, she must have turned things around enough to satisfy the board.

Just then, Weston came into the kitchen, his gaze steady on Ruby.

Everything shifted underneath her. Here was the man she wanted and loved. She loved his heart, his steadiness, his goodness. She loved that little dimple in his chin.

“Hey,” Ruby said, a feeling of uncertainty overcoming her. “I was about to call out a search party.” She quirked up a corner of her mouth and clutched her hands together across her middle.

In two steps, he overtook her with a hug, careful and full. She breathed in his scent and, without thinking, her hands traveled over the backs of his arms and down to his waist.

He whispered in her ear, and she remembered their dance and his husky, low voice as he sang. “Whatever happens with Rise Up and the ranch, I want to be with you. Please. Going to Missouri was a mistake, and I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “You’ve already apologized. Besides, you talked with Magda. I can’t believe you did that.”

“I had to try.”

She felt his shrug under their embrace, a sad resignation.

“Something worked because I just got off the phone with Magda.” She pulled back and gazed at him. “Everything’s back on, Weston. We’re days away from getting all Risen Up in here.”

He breathed in sharply, then let his head drop back, a laugh shaking his shoulders. “Really?”

“And you don’t have to leave. We need you here. Will you stay and help me?”

He placed a quick kiss on her forehead and then grabbed her hand, dragging her out of the kitchen. Ruby realized that at some point, Gramps had disappeared, leaving them alone.

Weston led her to his truck and opened her door for her before running around to the driver’s side. “Weston, where are we going?” she asked after he’d peeled out of the driveway and they were bumping along the lane.

He placed his pointer finger over his lips. “You’ll be spending a lot more time on the ranch now, so you’d better start learning the ropes around here.”

“Do I have to literally learn the ropes, as in do some roping of calves or other such beasts?”

Weston’s breathy chuckle was every glorious sound she’d heard combined into one. “Not off the bat, no. But if you get really good at the basics, I might teach you to rope.”

Ruby shuffled in her seat to get closer to him. If it weren’t for the seatbelt, she’d be sitting on his lap. She smiled at the thought of Weston on a horse, swinging a rope round and round above his head. In this fantasy, he was doing it without a shirt on, but that wasn’t a requirement. She’d gladly have it either way.

“You still haven’t said where we’re going.”

“Patience, my darling Ruby.” He glanced at her, the windows of the truck cab down just enough to whip her hair around her face. “Ruby, my gem. Ruby, my treasure.”

She lifted a knuckle to his face and touched it softly. The brush against his whiskers stoked the love within her.

When they arrived at the grazing land, Ruby gasped. “There’s an actual babbling brook up here?”

Weston laughed again. She wanted to keep making him laugh for the rest of their lives. That seemed like the worthiest goal she’d ever had.

“And the cows with their calves. And the little house for the hands to stay in,” he pointed out.

Ruby climbed out of the truck. “Don’t forget the green grass and incredible view.” She pointed to the outlook area across the way, where Silver Plum and other small communities lay. The sun was brilliant, and it sliced through stark white clouds, sending beams that shone down to the scene below them, punctuating the cloud’s shadows.

“And the picnic lunch,” Weston said, reaching for her hand. He led her near the edge of the vista to where a red and white checkered quilt had been spread out, complete with a basket and an insulated jug.

“You made this for us?”

Weston nodded. “After I met with Magda.”

“How come the cows didn’t come and gobble everything up?”

“Frederico and Blake helped me out with that part.”

She tugged him close to her. “Thank heavens for Frederico and Blake.” Settling even nearer to him, she sighed. “Weston, I love you.”

His sharp intake of air only ramped up Ruby’s own breathing. “I hadn’t planned on falling for you,” she spoke through a smile. “But I guess part of me has loved you ever since the rodeo in Missouri.”

“Even though you had the fight in the bag already and didn’t need me?” he asked, a laugh in the air.

She nodded. “Even though I didn’t need you.” She squirmed even closer to him, a fleeting wisp of frustration that she still didn’t feel close enough to the one she loved. “But I need you now. And I always will.”

He gripped her even tighter, a soft growl escaping his chest. “I love you, Ruby.” Everything strong about him mixed with the pleading in his voice to create a tangible manifestation of the most incredible thing Ruby had ever touched, tasted, or felt: their love.

High above Silver Plum, with the mooing cattle, the breeze, and in Weston’s arms, she finally knew loving him would be worth it. It would be the most important work she would ever do.

And she couldn’t wait to get started.

Epilogue

Four weeks later

The heat of the day had infiltrated the horse barn, but Weston barely noticed. He worked by Ruby's side, and her presence was better than one of those neck fans or frozen gel neck pad things.

Okay, so he could go for one of those, too. But being with Ruby really did help make mucking the stalls feel a lot less like a chore and more like fun.

"I never realized before how lazy I actually was," she said with a snigger. She rested the pitchfork against Gertrude's empty stall and took off her gloves. The girls had been cleaning them out that morning, as per their list of weekly tasks, but the therapist had arrived, so Ruby and Weston offered to finish the last one.

Weston placed an arm around her, standing next to her, facing the stall. She eased away from him a little. "Perspiration alert," she warned. "Forget about teaching the girls the value of hard work; I'm the one getting a crash course here."

Not missing a beat, he dipped her back and cupped the backs of her legs against his other arm. She shrieked in surprise, and up she went as he cradled her against his chest. "I'm not worried about a little moisture." His gaze flitted over her face. "I love you, sweat and all."

"I love you, too, Weston." Her dark eyes danced, and she squealed again as he hefted her closer to him.

In the weeks since the program had started, they'd had little time for these quiet moments. But here and now, while the girls were safely working in the corral, they could take a moment to connect, right?

Wrong. A throat cleared, and Weston spun around to see Gramps in the doorway of the horse barn.

"Hey there, Gramps."

"Hi yourselves. Didn't mean to interrupt anything."

Weston carried Ruby over to the doorway and then gently let her slide down. She was precious cargo, and he planned to treat her that way for the rest of his life. Not like cargo. Just like she was precious, because she really was.

"You're not interrupting," Ruby assured, straightening the ponytail higher on her head. "Need any help?"

Gramps showed them his phone. "I got an email from Tory Olson about getting some more cattle up there on our high property." He scrolled to the right part of the email and showed them. "She said she can get us forty more by the end of the week."

Weston's brain stopped short. "You're getting more cattle? I didn't know that's what you wanted."

"How are we going to do anything at all with the hundred head we have up there now? It's like we're losing money. It's like we're a bunch of kids playing ranch. I want to be one of the grown-ups again." Gramps smiled.

"Does this zest for life I see in those eyeballs of yours have anything to do with eating lunch at the Clucky Spud yesterday with Cynthia Hughes?" Weston asked. Sometimes the rumor mill in town came in handy, and he didn't know what to do with this odd information.

But he knew he couldn't not ask. Gramps had felt it his duty to ask Weston about Ruby on the daily. He deserved a taste of his own medicine.

"A gentleman never tells, Wes." Gramps gave a wink before letting his gaze take in the barn and changing the

subject. “I think we should add re-staining the window trim on this barn to our list of things to do. We’ve got to make this place nicer if we’re going to be expanding.”

Weston had told himself it didn’t matter. He knew he would respect whatever Gramps’s wishes were. But hearing the word “expanding” from Gramps’s mouth made Weston feel alive with even more purpose than before.

“You know, you’re kind of a great man,” Weston told Gramps, glancing down at Ruby before sliding an arm around her again.

“Yeah,” Ruby agreed. “I think we should buy you a shirt with a pickle on it that says, ‘I’m kind of a big dill,’” she said to Gramps.

Gramps started to giggle. “Oh no, here it comes,” Weston said. Once Gramps got going, there wasn’t much anyone could do to get him to stop.

“I’m not sure Cynthia would approve of a shirt like that,” Weston narrowed his eyes at Gramps, who batted a hand at Weston’s comment.

He still couldn’t work around the idea of Gramps and Cynthia liking each other. But if she had anything to do with Gramps’s hiccupping giggle-fest he had going on right then, Weston supposed it was okay.

Besides, it was making Ruby laugh now, and that was really okay with Weston.

Gramps left the barn, and Ruby and Weston finished with the last stall. She pushed the wheelbarrow, and Weston carried the pitchforks. Bits and pieces of the girls’ voices could be heard as Ruby and Weston passed the corral. It felt nice to get to have more people enjoy all the ranch had to offer.

“Are you freaking out?” Ruby asked.

“About what? The forty head or how nerdy he got when we mentioned Cynthia?”

Ruth clicked her tongue. “Both, I guess.”

“It’s going to be a while before I can talk about Cynthia and Gramps. But that he’s purchasing more cows instead of selling off the ones we already have? I’d say that’s promising.”

Ruby stopped walking and eased the wheelbarrow handles down. She stepped towards him, all sun. All joy. All everything.

She went on her tiptoes to kiss him. “I love this life here with you, Weston. This is what I want.”

His throat grew thick, and he slid his hand along her dark, shiny hair. “As long as you’re here with me so we can save each other from any punches being thrown, then I agree.”

“There will be no punches!” Ruby cried, then grew still. “I’m being serious. This is real for me.” She gazed at his face, every inch of it. “I used to be confused. I thought love wasn’t worth the chance of feeling pain. But I was wrong. If I’m with you, I say ‘bring it on, Life.’ I’m ready.”

Weston’s gut filled with awe. And before he kissed her, he said one last thing, “I’m ready for this. All of it. Come what may, I want you right beside me. Forever.”

One Month Later

Couples Tower Isle, Ocho Rios, Jamaica

Waves from the turquoise-tinted Caribbean rose and broke just a hundred yards away from the small wedding party seated on teak, high-backed chairs. A florally breeze fanned the guests and Anjali Grey and Parker Newberry while they listened to Reverend Taylor speak on the sanctity of marriage.

Mabel thought again how perfect Anjali’s dress was for her. In the weeks leading up to the wedding, any time one of the friends asked about her dress, Anj replied that she was going to wear Daisy Dukes and a tank top that said “Beach Hair, Don’t Care.” And Parker had seemed fine with that, joining in by saying he was planning on just wearing his navy swim shorts.

Mabel had been ... eighty percent sure the couple was kidding and hoping to surprise everyone. She'd even wondered if the beautiful yogi would wear some sort of white workout leggings and tank with a fun veil or something.

But when Anjali and Parker stepped out of the resort glass doors holding hands while a small band played the ukulele version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," the crowd sighed and cheered. The couple had decided to forego a traditional walk down the aisle, and Anjali wore a boho A-line dress with sheer lantern sleeves, a soft tulle skirt, and applied illusion-lace. Her hair was almost back to its original dark color, with a few strands of lightened tresses streaming out of the delicate up-do. Parker's medium blue suit was trim and fitted, somehow perfect for the beach. They were both barefoot.

As the reverend continued to speak, Mabel's gaze took in the people seated near her. They were the only thing more beautiful to her in that moment than this slice of paradise. They weren't just friends; they were family.

Liam's arm was around his wife, Tory, whose face held a healthy golden glow. Maybe the tropical air was helping with her morning sickness?

In front of them sat Hannah and August, fanning themselves with white folding fans from the gift shop. Their wedding was just two months away, and Hannah was only showing brief flashes of Bridezilla at this point.

Henry Duncan, the youngest KNO member, was curled up on his mom, Cady's shoulder. His baby curls clung to his soft, clear skin in the humidity. Mabel wasn't sure if Mack and Cady were watching the ceremony at all ... they were riveted on every shudder and sigh coming from Henry's sleeping form.

Weston looked so different in his non-cowboy attire: a silk Guevara button-down in light blue. From the looks of it, Ruby was fascinated by the change because she couldn't keep her eyes off him as they locked gazes intermittently through Reverend Taylor's speech.

Mabel sensed Zane leaning towards her from her right side even before he spoke. “We’ve been to a lot of these weddings now, haven’t we?” he whispered in her ear.

Was no one listening to the reverend? Not even his own son?

She nodded, not looking at him, then moved in her chair to better hear. Zane’s dad always had wise words. Besides, it was rude to talk during a wedding ceremony. Sometimes Zane was just impossible.

“You caught the bouquet at Tory and Liam’s. Doesn’t that mean you were supposed to get married next? You’re overdue.” His voice was teasing.

Yes, she’d caught the bouquet. Forget that stupid, old wives’ tale.

Her normal, unbidden response to Zane was always a strange flash—a mix of care, memory, and frustration. She’d had feelings for him once, a long time ago, the strong, heady, soulmate types of feelings.

But he nixed that almost before she’d allowed herself to go there; thankfully before anyone else found out. And now she was left with nothing but KNOs that were something akin to a medieval torture device: if he decided to show up, she spent the two hours secretly aware of his every move, his every word. And if he wasn’t there, she thanked her lucky stars that she could enjoy her food and the company in peace, all the while cursing his name under her breath because he hadn’t come.

So, see? Zane was impossible.

It seemed like Reverend Taylor was wrapping up, and then the vows would be exchanged. Her insides thrummed. That was always her favorite part.

“Should we just tell the world, ‘to heck with ya’ and have our own wedding? The two of us, husband and wife?” Zane’s breath on her neck made her senses come alive, but his words stoked her always-brewing feelings of almost contempt for him.

“You and me get married?” she shot back in a whisper. “That would be an absolute trainwreck off the Cliffs of Insanity.”

He stuck his fist into his chest, and his voice was garbled and, frankly, a little too loud. “You cut me like a knife, Mabel.”

She glared at him. She cut him like a knife?

Shaking her head, she shushed him and pointed to his dad. Reverend Taylor was wrapping up, crescendoing to the most poignant ending, and she’d missed much of what he was saying.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Zane begin to smile as he looked at her. And then, she made the worst mistake she could have: she turned to look at him.

His eyes, achingly tender. His mouth, a smile that was wistful and shy. He swallowed, and his Adam’s apple went down and back up. He grasped her wrist as his expression changed to something stronger and raw.

“Come here.” It was still a whisper, but almost a hiss. He stood, pulled her up with him, and held on to her wrist as he began to stalk out of the wedding.

He came to himself after three steps, letting go of her wrist as if it’d scalded him. His face went pale, and he didn’t look at her but kept walking. Mabel thought she heard his father pause his speech, but she wasn’t sure.

She followed Zane behind a screen of greenery—tangled vines that shielded them from view.

“What is wrong with you?” Now her words were a hiss.

He was breathing rapidly, pacing and stalking like a wild beast. His beachy white shirt and pants looked like he was ready to tear out of them like Hulk. He was both bear and tiger. Large, growly, lithe.

He wouldn’t look at her. “I’m sorry. I was out of line to drag you from the wedding like that.” His hand swiped against his mouth.

She glanced back toward the wedding and smoothed her pale-yellow sundress. Her voice was softer now. “Are you okay?”

His gaze raked over her as his face started getting some color back. “No. I’m not okay. And you know exactly why.”

Read the rest of Zane and Mabel’s story [HERE!](#)

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