



THE BRIDGE BROTHERS
RANCH OF WEST HOPE
South Dakota

A Sweet Deal
for the
Cowboy



WILLOW WHITE

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Chapter 1

“What’s got you in such a sour mood?” Kash asked.

Gunner ground his teeth together. “I’m not sour,” he lied. He had gotten to church too early. Why had he gotten there so early? Oh yeah, because he’d been in a hurry to get away from his ranch.

“How are things going with Rocky and Bullwinkle?” Kash asked.

Gunner’s jaw started to hurt.

Bella, Kash’s girlfriend, giggled. “Is that really their names?”

Gunner waited for Kash to answer her, but he didn’t, because that would have been a normal thing to do. “No,” Gunner said without looking at her. He liked Bella, but he didn’t like sitting beside the obnoxious love birds. They’d been together for over a year now. Shouldn’t the giddiness have worn off by now?

Polly, Kash’s daughter, must have sensed his unease because she slid off the pew and came and climbed up onto his lap. He wrapped an arm around her so she would know she was welcome.

“So then why did you call them that?” Bella asked Kash.

“Because that’s their names.”

“No, it’s not,” Gunner said. He was going to have to find a new pew. But then he’d have to sit alone. And he wouldn’t be able to sit in the back anymore. He was glad his brothers had all renewed their interest in God, but he resented that they’d infiltrated his back pew peace. He took a breath. None of this was Bella’s fault, and he didn’t want to be rude to her. “They didn’t even know each other when I hired them. Rocky’s name is Rocky.” He gave Kash some side-eye that he hoped would scold him, but Kash only laughed. “And the other man’s name is Simon. His nickname is Bull. Kash here has named him Bullwinkle, but I bet the farm that he would never, ever say

that to his face because Bull would squash him like a stink bug.”

Polly giggled. “Stink bug,” she repeated.

“Oh.” Bella elbowed Kash. “Stop calling him that. I don’t want to have to visit you in the hospital.”

Kash laughed. “Don’t worry. I am man enough to run away when I need to.”

Gunner rolled his eyes. Sometimes Kash reminded him of a goat. Goofy, stubborn, and dumb, but entertaining enough that people kept him around.

The service started, and Gunner silently thanked God. He stood for the opening hymn and kept Polly in his arms, even though she was getting heavy for this. He would do it while he could. His brother Colton’s wife Adeline was expecting, so he hoped Polly would let him hold her until he could hold that little guy. Or girl.

Gunner had accepted that he would never have kids of his own—he was forty now, after all—but he’d found that he really liked being an uncle, so he wanted Denver, Colton, Ryker, and Tucker to have lots of kids. As awesome as Polly had turned out, he wasn’t sure it was safe for Kash to reproduce anymore.

They all sat after the hymn, and an elder approached the pulpit wearing a somber face. He shared that Kathy Feeldy had died the night before. A hush fell over the congregation. This was incredibly sad, as she’d been young and left three young children behind, but she’d also been sick for a long time, and they all knew that the end might be near. Her husband had died only a year before in a logging accident. Gunner felt a little sick wondering about what would happen to the kids.

He knew that Kathy had an older daughter too, and he scanned the room for her, finding her near the front with her head bowed. The elder went on to ask for prayers for Kathy’s oldest daughter, Nova, which reminded Gunner of her name. Nova was a cool name. The prayer request was vague, but it

sounded like Nova was trying to get custody of her siblings, and that this wasn't going well.

The elder led a prayer, and Gunner's heart went out to the woman sitting in the front pew all alone. Despite how tired she looked, she was beautiful. Her long, thick, wavy hair made him think of autumn leaves. Her angular face made her look strong.

After the amen, they stood for another hymn, and Bella asked, "How old are the kids?"

"The oldest two ride my bus," Kash said. "There's a third one in pre-school."

"I don't get it," Bella said. "She's their sister, right? Why wouldn't they give her custody?"

"Because she's *crazy*," Kash said. Coming from Kash, Gunner knew this wasn't an insult. It could mean a variety of things, and none of them negative. He'd probably meant that she lived life on the wild side—like he'd done for a long time.

"Don't say that," Bella scolded him. She obviously hadn't accurately translated Kash's comment.

"No, really," Kash said. "She's a total hippie. She follows some folk band around the country in a van. CPS wants you to be married, employed, and having a place to live before they'll give you kids."

Gunner's chest ached.

No one was going to love those kids like their own family.

It wasn't fair. To Nova or her siblings.



Chapter 2

“No, please,” Nova cried. “Not now!” She tapped her van’s instrument panel with one finger, though she knew full well that her van had bigger problems than a faulty gauge or two.

It was making a death rattle.

The gas pedal didn’t do anything. She told herself to be grateful that she still had brakes, but she didn’t need them now—Old Yeller was slowing down on its own.

She looked up from the console to see a curl of smoke escape from under her hood. The death rattle gave way to silence, and the van coasted to a stop.

Nova guided it to the edge of the empty road and then laid her head on the steering wheel. *Don’t cry. Don’t cry.*

She took a deep breath and sat up. She had enough problems. Being emotionally stable was pretty much the only thing she had going for her. So she had to *stay* emotionally stable.

It was already warming up in the van.

She rolled the window down and took off her outer shirt. There, that was better. This was tank top weather, anyway.

She checked her ancient prepaid phone, not expecting to have a signal. She did, though. But, who was she going to call?

She had friends, sure, but none within five hundred miles.

She closed her eyes and whispered, “I don’t think I’ve ever needed you more than I need you now. I don’t know what to do. Please tell me. If you want me to give up, please tell me. If you want me to keep trying, please send me a sign.”

She sensed more than heard someone coming up behind her. She looked in the rearview mirror to see a pickup coming. “Lord, please let him be kind.” Rich, handsome, and single would be good too, but kindness was all she really needed.

The truck slowed and then crept by her. Between the window and the cowboy hat he wore, she couldn't get a good look at his face. Then she laughed out loud when he pulled over in front of her van, and she saw that he had two goats in the back of his truck.

He got out of the truck. *Whoa*. That was one tall drink of water. And he looked familiar.

"Having trouble?" he asked. His voice was deep but soft, masculine but gentle.

She told herself to get a grip.

"It made a loud *clunk clunk clunk*, and then it just stopped. And there's smoke."

"I see that." He patted the hood. "I'll take a look."

She popped the hood and got out of the van, checking him out while his eyes were too busy to catch her doing so. He was older than her, a gift to blue jeans, and *where* did she know him from?

Sure, she'd grown up around here, but she'd forgotten most everything and everyone from her childhood. Most of it on purpose.

"Looks like you've got some head gasket trouble," he said, straightening.

"Sounds serious."

He wiped his hands on his pants. "I suppose that's up to you."

Huh?

"I know a good mechanic in West Hope, but you're headed in the wrong direction." He looked up the road. "Are you trying to get to Rapid?"

"I've been camping at Bear Creek?" *Why did I just say that like it was a question?*

He nodded. "Well, I can give you a ride there. I can call Rodney for you, and have it towed back to West Hope, to his

place, or if you're pressed for cash, I'm sure he'd tow it to my place."

Wow, that was really generous of him.

He stared at her, waiting for her answer.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "You look so familiar ... I feel like I should know you."

He looked a little scared.

"Please don't be offended. I'm really bad with faces ..."

When he still didn't say anything, she added, "And names."

A small smile crept onto his lips.

"We go to the same church. My name is Gunner."

That made sense. There were a lot of people at that church, and she didn't know any of them. "Well, it's great to meet you, Gunner. Thank you for stopping." The moment grew awkward, and her eyes flicked to his truck.

One of the goats looked at her and let out a bone-chilling scream.

She couldn't help but giggle. It was a scary scream, for sure, but also funny. "Where are you taking your goats?"

"To their new home, just this side of Rapid."

"Are you like some kind of goat salesman?"

He chuckled. "No. I run a goat rescue."

Her knees wobbled a bit. Was she really going to fall in love with this man standing here on the side of the road in hundred-degree heat?

Maybe.

No, she told herself. She didn't have time for this.

"I'm happy to give you a lift to your campground."

What was she going to do? "Thanks, but I can't really camp at the campground without Old Yeller."

He looked around, and she realized he was looking for a dog.

“That’s what I call my van. Old Yeller.”

“Oh ...” he said slowly. “Well, I can take you anywhere you want?”

The trouble was, she didn’t know where she could go.

“Uh ...” He looked at his toes. “Because I was in church this morning, I know a little about your situation. So I’m not trying to be nosy or creepy or whatever ... but I have a ranch in West Hope. We’ve got a spare room if you need a place to crash. I already have two ranch hands staying with me if that makes it less weird.”

She wanted to jump on that like a trampoline, but she didn’t want to freak him out with her eagerness, so she tried to play it demurely. She pretended to think about it. “Sure, I’d be grateful.”

“It’s not much,” he said quickly. “It’s not the Bannon ranch or anything. It’s actually kind of ancient and—”

“It’ll be perfect,” she said before he could finish insulting his own ranch.

“All right. You mind if I drop the goats off first?”

The goat screamed again and banged its horns into the metal crate. She waited for a break in the ruckus to say, “Not at all.” She certainly had nothing else on her schedule for the evening. She’d been planning on a campfire and a paperback by lantern light. “Let me grab my things.” She hurriedly shoved as much as she could into her over-sized knapsack, but assuming that his ranch had electricity, she left her lantern behind.

She locked all the doors and then double checked them. “Sorry,” she said, feeling self-conscious. “I doubt anyone would try to rob a van that looks like this, but everything I own is in there.”

“No problem. I’m in no hurry.”

She glanced at the back of the truck. “I was thinking more of your goats. They have to be hot.”

“They’ll be fine. They just like to complain.” Did she detect a hint of sadness in his voice?



Chapter 3

Gunner opened the truck door for Nova before climbing behind the wheel. The whole time, Kash's words echoed in his brain: She needed a job, a house, and a husband if she was going to get those kids.

She had a long way to go if she was sleeping in her van. He glanced in the rearview mirror. Especially *that* van. He was surprised it had run at all. He started the truck to get the AC going. "I'll call Rodney. Do you want the van towed to his shop or my house?"

She thought about it, chewing her lip.

"The shop is fine." She didn't sound sure, but he didn't argue.

He called Rodney and made the arrangements.

When he'd ended the call, she thanked him.

"You're welcome." He pulled out onto the road, and she watched her van shrink in the side mirror.

"So how does your goat rescue work? Is it like an animal shelter? Can people adopt your goats?"

He swallowed hard. He was glad that he'd found these goats a loving home, but he always struggled to give them up after he'd gotten to know them. But it was nice that this woman was showing interest without being critical. Everyone poked fun at him for the goats, but he didn't hear a hint of ridicule in Nova's voice. "I keep them for a while to make sure they're not bullies, and I do all the health testing to make sure they won't infect other goats with something if they join another herd. And of course, I don't want someone to adopt an unhealthy goat. So ..." He realized how much he was talking and became self-conscious.

"So?" she said.

"So ... yes, I keep them for a while, and then if someone wants to adopt a goat, they can come visit the ranch."

“That’s so cool. I wanted to adopt a dog once, and they wouldn’t let me because I lived in my van.” She let out a dainty growl. “They were *so* judgmental. I had to fill out this fifty-page application, and then they denied me because I didn’t have a fenced-in yard.” She shook her head. “I mean, they were euthanizing dogs because they couldn’t find homes for them, but me and my van weren’t good enough.” She looked at him. “Do you make your people apply before you’ll let them be heroes?”

He shook his head. “I just make sure they don’t plan to eat them.”

She let out a startled laugh. “Oh no! That would be awful.”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure the goat would think so.”

She laughed again. “Hey, you’re funny!”

He didn’t say anything. She was wrong, but he wasn’t going to argue.

“So what made you decide to start a goat rescue? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“It was an accident. I took in a few goats for people in need, and then word spread that I would do that, and then I was inundated. And then the Bannons got involved ...” He looked at her. “You know who I mean, right?”

“Yeah, the biggest ranch in the state? The people with the gold mine?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, them. Well, they got involved, and then I had the funding to do it for real, and so I did.”

“And you like it?”

He nodded. He didn’t want to admit how much he liked it.

“And these ranch hands ... are they there for the goats?”

“No,” he said quickly. “It’s still a cattle ranch, and it’s been going pretty well, so I couldn’t keep up with everything myself. You know, with the goats and everything.”

“So cool. I’m riding around with a real-life rancher.”

Unsure of how to respond to that, he asked, “Would you like some music?”

“Sure!” She sounded excited. “What do you have?”

“Uh ... the radio?”

She giggled. “Okay. I’m up for some time travel.”

He gestured to the dash. “It’s all yours.”

She went through every single station and then started again. Did she know that she’d already been through them all? When she started on her third trip through, he wondered if he should say something but decided not to. She seemed happy pressing the seek button over and over again. Who was he to interfere with her fun?

By the time she finally gave up and landed on 98.7, he had lost count of how many times she’d passed 98.7.

She sat back and started tapping her toes to the beat. She caught him looking at her feet, and he looked away quickly, his cheeks getting hot.

“How can you wear leather cowboy boots in this heat?” she asked.

“I wear socks too.” He’d rather die than wear sandals. The only time he had his dogs out was in the shower.

And even then, sometimes he was tempted to keep his boots on.



Chapter 4

The radio was playing a sad song, and Nova was working hard to ignore it when the handsome semi-stranger pulled his truck into a short driveway. The driveway led to a double wide trailer on a very small lot. Where were they going to put the goats, the basement?

“Were you around for the Black Hawk sinkhole?” Gunner asked.

“The what?”

He pointed out his window. “See that fence?”

“Yeah?” Behind the fence sat at least a half dozen houses, but the grass on their lawns looked to be waist high. It looked like a scene from an apocalypse movie.

“A few years ago, a giant sinkhole opened up,” he explained, “and those houses started sinking.”

“What?” she cried. “Is that a thing in South Dakota? Giant sinkholes?” She’d grown up here, but she couldn’t remember any stories about the earth trying to eat houses. She’d forgotten most of her childhood, but she knew herself well enough to know that something like that would have stuck with her.

“I’ve never heard of another case. Those houses were built on an old gypsum mine.”

That didn’t make much sense. “Did they not know the mine was under them?”

“I’m not sure if the people who *built* the houses knew,” Gunner said slowly, “but I’d be willing to bet that the people who *bought* the houses didn’t know.”

She scooted a little closer to him for a better look. If it were this eerie from far away, she imagined it would be spectacular up close. “Can you go down in the mine?”

“No idea.”

“We should go try.”

Gunner’s head snapped her way. “What?”

She laughed. “Yeah, wouldn’t it be cool to go in? I love caves.”

“It’s not a cave. It’s an old mine, and that would be a really bad decision.” He narrowed his eyes. “Aren’t you supposed to be on your best behavior right now?”

Oh yeah. She straightened, feeling appropriately chastised. He was right. She had to stop thinking about fun and adventure. Everything was about Gabby, Conley, and Mona now. Her fun was done, so that she could give *them* the funnest life possible.

Gunner looked out the windshield. “Here come our new goat owners.”

Nova looked to see a blonde woman in a sundress, and a little girl with the same blonde hair running toward the truck. Her long locks flew out behind her, and her smile spread from ear to ear.

They did not look like goat farmers.

Gunner got out of the truck, and Nova wondered if it was okay to follow. They started chatting, and she couldn’t make out what they were saying. She felt left out, so she got out of the truck.

Gunner stiffly introduced her as his friend, but Sophia and her daughter Madison were too excited about the goats to care about Nova. If Gunner hadn’t made introductions, they wouldn’t have noticed she was there.

Gunner went to the back of the truck, and Madison followed. Again, worried that she might miss something, Nova went too and got there just as Gunner was scooping the first goat out of the giant crate and lowering it to the ground. It bleated what sounded more like a complaint than a thanks. Then it trotted off twenty feet to the right before it turned to look back for its friend. They were really close to the street. Granted, it was empty of vehicles, but still, wasn’t Gunner being a little blasé with his goat supervision?

But then, when he lowered the second goat to the dirt, the first one ran back to him, so maybe the goat farmer knew more about goats than she did.

Madison giggled and reached out to pat one of the goats, who jerked away from her touch. She stuck out a trembling bottom lip.

Gunner grabbed the goat by the collar and squatted down to be eye level with them both. “Don’t worry. She’s being shy. She’s not used to riding in the truck. But in a few days, she’s going to be falling in love with you and begging for your attention.” He guided Madison’s little fingers to the spot between the two horns. “This is where she likes to be scratched.”

Madison giggled and scratched the goat’s head.

This time, the goat let her. “See?” Gunner said. “She’s falling already.”

She wasn’t the only one.

The mom stepped closer. “Come on, honey, let’s show them their new home.”

Gunner grabbed one of the collars. “Show us the way.” Sophia turned and started walking, and Gunner followed, gently tugging on one of the goat’s collars. After a brief hesitation, the second goat followed.

Nova, feeling distinctly out of the place, brought up the rear.

Behind the trailer, in a small backyard, was the smallest barn she’d ever seen. It was cobbled together from different kinds of wood. Some of the boards had fading paint on them—red turned pink, a yellow that almost matched her van, and a minty green.

It was the most beautiful barn she’d ever seen. Her heart ached with a desire to build a barn just like that for her sisters and brother.

Unlike the barn, the metal fence around it looked brand new.

“Nice fence,” she said, reaching out to give it a shake. Yep, it was as sturdy as it looked.

Sophia smiled. “Isn’t it great? Gunner built it for us.”

Nova looked at him with an eyebrow raised. “That is one full-service goat delivery.”

Gunner laughed. “That’s one thing I’ve learned from all my goat time—how to build fences.”

“I would never have asked him to do it,” Sophia said. She put her arm around her daughter’s shoulder as Gunner led the goat through the gate and into their tiny new pasture. “But Madison here really wanted goats, and I just wasn’t equipped for them yet, so Gunner sped up the timeline.”

“So you built the barn too?” Nova asked.

Gunner’s nod was barely perceptible, but Sophia said, “Isn’t it great? Just the right size.”

Gunner pulled the gate shut and nodded toward the ground. “They’ll eat the grass in here before sundown. Do you have hay?”

Sophia nodded and pointed to a woodshed behind the house. “We’re good to go.”

“Great. Call me if you need anything.”

Sophia thanked him, and then Madison ran to him and hugged his leg. “Thank you!” she chirped.

He reached down and rubbed the top of her head. “You’re welcome, pipsqueak. You take good care of them, all right?”

She giggled. “I will.”

Nova fell into step with Gunner, and they were wordless on their way to the truck, but when she climbed in, she sensed something was wrong. “Are you okay?”

He cleared his throat. “It’s always bittersweet finding them new homes. I’m happy, of course. This is always the plan, but I get attached to them individually, and then I miss them.”

Wow, who *was* this guy? He looked like a big, tough cowboy. He looked like a guy who had never even encountered a feeling, let alone suffered from one.

“It’s a really cool thing you’re doing.”

He didn’t say anything, and the silence felt oppressive.

“So are they going to be just pets for them?”

“Sophia said that she wants to milk one, but I’m thinking they’ll mostly be pets, yeah.”

They were quiet for a minute, and Nova was sad to be driving away from the sinking village. In an attempt to focus on future adventures instead of missed ones, she said, “So I’m now headed to a goat rescue where I’m going to spend the night. Might there be any baby goats at this ranch of yours?” She let her hope ring out loud and clear.

“Only about a dozen.”

She couldn’t help but squeal.



Chapter 5

Gunner jumped when Nova squealed. Wow, this woman was really excited about the prospect of baby goats.

“Can I cuddle them?”

“Sure.”

She clapped her hands. “Man, that is the *best* news. In fact, that’s the only good news I’ve had in a while.”

“I’m sorry,” he said and meant it.

“Thanks.” She went from giddy to sober on a dime. “It’s so much ... I don’t really know what to say about it.”

“That’s okay. I wasn’t asking you to say anything.”

She sighed. “I was with my mom at the end. I’m the one who took care of her, took care of the kids, but I guess the landlord was just itching to kick her out because right after she died they told me that her lease had been up a while ago.”

“Really?” He scratched his beard. That didn’t sound very South Dakota of them.

“Yeah, really. I think she might have been a bit behind on the payments. She was behind on everything near the end because the medical bills were just so much. Anyway, I thought it would be simple, you know? She’d leave us for heaven, and then I could keep living there and just get a job and take care of the kids. I still don’t understand how it got so complicated, but man ... it really did.”

“Where are the kids now?”

“They’re in a temporary foster home, which I *hate*. I don’t know these people. I don’t know that my siblings are safe or scared or cold or ...” She got choked up, and he wanted to reach across the cab and comfort her, but he didn’t know how.

“Anyway,” she continued after several seconds, “they are together for now, but there’s no guarantee that they’ll stay that way.”

“CPS just said no? Did they tell you what you needed to change to be able to take care of them?”

“Not really,” she said angrily. “The woman I’m dealing with, she is a real puritan. She hates me. I think she’d throw rocks at me if she could do it without getting arrested.”

His chest grew hot, and he became head-to-toe uncomfortable. Surely she was exaggerating?

“She said that I had to get a job, which *obviously*—I knew that. How else would I support three kids? But she said it like it would never have occurred to me, and she acted the same way about finding a place to live. *Duh*. I know that kids need a place to live, but I had been thinking that we could stay in my mom’s apartment, so I was completely blindsided by the eviction, and she just gave me no time to recover from that. I was trying to plan the funeral and trying to deal with her and still help the kids with their grief, all at the same time. And she also said ...” Her voice cracked again, and she didn’t finish her sentence.

So Kash had been right? How often did *that* happen? Nova hadn’t finished her last sentence. Had she been about to say that this woman had also said that she needed to get married? Gunner couldn’t imagine that this would be a qualification in this day and age, but Nova had also said that this woman was a Puritan, so maybe? Gunner had been accused in the past of being naive; maybe he just didn’t understand how these things worked.

“I’m sorry,” she said a minute later when she’d recovered. “I didn’t mean to unload on you. You hardly know me.” She looked at him, and he felt a little squirmy under her gaze. “And I suppose it’s a little late to ask this since I’ve already vented all over your truck, but would you mind keeping this between us?”

“Of course,” he said quickly.

“Thanks. It’s not that I’m ashamed. I’m not. In my view, I haven’t done anything wrong. They are judging me unfairly. I have lived an awesome life. Just because it’s not a conventional one doesn’t mean that it’s wrong or shameful.

But I learned long ago not to trust people in West Hope so I'd rather keep them out of my business."

In *West Hope?* he thought. West Hope was incredibly friendly and helpful. What was she talking about? "What about our church?"

She leveled a hard stare at him. "What about them?"

"Did you grow up there?"

"Sort of."

He didn't know what that meant.

"Did *you* grow up there?" she said.

He nodded. "I sure did. My mother was a fixture in that place."

"And you don't remember me?"

"Do you remember me?" he asked.

She laughed. "I don't, but I try to forget things."

He didn't know what that meant either. "I would probably remember you if we were closer in age."

She was staring at him again.

"I mean, I'm quite a bit older than you. It's not like we were in the same Sunday school class or something."

"I think *quite a bit* is an exaggeration. But anyway, I'm not offended that you don't remember me. Why would you? A lot of kids have gone through that church."

"That is true. I asked you that because I would think they would be able to help you."

"Yeah, right," she scoffed.

"What does that mean?" He felt himself bristle in defense of his church.

"I mean that ... look, I'm just not big on organized religion." She looked out the window.

What was she talking about? "I'm not asking you to start a committee. I'm just thinking that they could probably help

with the job and the place to live and ... you know, anything else.” He didn’t know if they’d find her a husband, but anything was possible.



Chapter 6

Nova watched the fields roll past her window. She was saying too much, but it was so nice to have someone interested enough in her life to want to listen. She wasn't used to that. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be negative, but when I was little, the people in that church were pretty horrible to me and my mom."

"They were?" He sounded shocked.

"Not all of them, of course, but it only takes a few kicks in the teeth to knock some loose. And yeah, my mom was a pregnant teen. Then she was a single mom. And I was kind of an unruly kid. She was a great mom in that she let me be a kid, but there were people there who said she wasn't a good mother because I was always running around with all this energy." She looked at his calm, stoic expression. "I bet you were just the opposite, weren't you? I bet you never got in trouble."

He shifted in his seat. "Something like that." Well, he obviously didn't want to talk about himself. She'd have to work on that, even things out a little. "So the women who were rude back then, are they even still there?"

They were far more than *rude*, but she didn't argue. "I have no idea. All I know is I started going as soon as I got back to town. I didn't want to, but I knew I was going to need all the God I could get to get through this, and I wanted extra people praying for me."

"And we have been."

"I know." She was butchering this. She needed to stop talking. "But it's been months, and no one has tried to include me in anything, no one has tried to get to know me, and so, to answer your question, no, I don't know how the church could help me. I think they'd probably side with Priscilla."

"Who's Priscilla?"

"Sorry, the Family Services Specialist who took my brother and sisters away from me."

He sighed. "I'm sorry that the church hasn't made you feel at home. And even though I was a quiet kid, I can relate to what you're saying."

"Really?" Her head snapped his way. What did *that* mean?

"Really. My mom was a saint, and she was always at the church, always working and helping, but our father was *not* always at the church. In fact, he never was. And everyone knew that he was a big ... well, he could be unpleasant. Anyway, to make it even weirder, I was adopted, so yes, people were nice to me. I didn't have it like you. But they always treated me like I was different, and even as a young kid, I always felt like I didn't belong."

Her heartache grew. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I'm perfectly comfortable being ignored now, but I just wanted to say that I understand, a little, anyway. So, I could ask around and see if anyone there is hiring or knows someone who's hiring." Something in his voice gave her the impression he didn't really want to do this.

"You don't have to do that. Thanks, though."

He glanced at her. "What are your skills? I mean, what are you good at?"

She laughed. "I play a mean snare drum."

He didn't say anything, so she glanced at him, and his expression was hilarious. And a little bit adorable. He was stupefied.

"Other than that, I'm good at kicking back and enjoying life. And those are not skills that CPS values."

He frowned. "But how have you been supporting yourself all these years? Yeah, you live in a van, but that van still needs gas. You still need food."

"You'd be surprised at how little I need to get by. But I do work. For starters, I offer yoga lessons on the road. I do them for free, but nearly everyone tips me. And sometimes I'll run merch tables for the bands. And occasionally, and I mean really occasionally, I'll fill in for someone on percussion."

“Really?”

She laughed. “You don’t have to sound so shocked. And yes. I’m not filling in for Lynyrd Skynyrd or anything. These are small-time bands.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“You didn’t. Despite what I just said about the church folk, I’m pretty hard to offend, and I get that people don’t really understand what my life is like. Or used to be like, I should say.”

“But you’re done with all that?” he said after a long pause. “You made it clear to Patsy or Pearl or—”

“Priscilla, yeah. I made it clear. But she acts like I’m a criminal, like I’ve been following bands around for less than honorable reasons.”

“Wow, this is a lot.”

“You’re not kidding.”

“And you’re okay, leaving that life behind?”

She thought about that for a minute. “Yeah, I really am.” She would miss it, but she cared way more about the kids than she did about her old life.



Chapter 7

Gunner had never been so glad that he'd pulled over to help someone with a broken-down vehicle—and he'd done it a lot. This woman was downright fascinating. He wished that he could remember her from their childhood. Those would probably be some pretty entertaining memories.

“Did you keep in touch with your siblings while you were out on the road?”

“Honestly? And please don't tell Priscilla this, but not really.” She heaved a great sigh. “The truth is that I loved my mother dearly, but we didn't really get along. Every time I would go home to visit, she would give me grief about how I was living my life, how I was wasting it. Why didn't I get married and settle down like a normal person? And so that would annoy me, and I would stay away. And so I didn't really know the kids that well, but then ...”

He waited. He didn't want to press.

“I've been taking care of her since she got really sick. I moved in with them, and the sicker she got, the more I ended up taking care of the kids too. And I just got to know them, and I fell in love with them.” She looked at him, her eyes pleading with him to understand. “It's not that I just love them because they are family. There is that kind of love too, but I also got to know them each as individuals, and they are each so cool. So even if they weren't blood, I would still love them. They are great humans.”

He thought she was done talking for a while, but she tagged on, “And I want them to have great lives, which I don't think they're going to have in foster care. I don't think I can give them the world. It would probably be a struggle to give them everything they need and want, but at least I would try. I would absolutely put them first.”

Gunner was so impressed. She was taking on so much, and she sounded like she really *wanted* to take it all on. This hadn't all been dumped on her. She'd willingly scooped it up.

“Well, I will help you in any way that I can. My brother’s girlfriend is a lawyer. She used to be a lawyer here in West Hope, but she moved to New Mexico. Still, she might be able to give some advice. Maybe she knows someone here who could help.”

“Why did she move to New Mexico?”

Gunner laughed, finding it funny that she was more interested in that than in the help Jenna might be able to offer. “She moved there to be with my brother. Have you ever heard of Zion Denver?”

She gasped. “Oh! I think I just figured out who you are!”

He chuckled ruefully. “Great.”

She laughed. “Sorry! I remember there was this big family, and that one of those brothers now stars on *Cheyenne*. That’s your brother?”

“Yep.”

“So you’re Gunner ... Denver?”

“I am not.” *Thank goodness.* “They changed his name. Sort of. His real name is Denver Bridge. I am Gunner Bridge.”

She turned her whole body to face him. She now sat sideways, staring at him. This gave his self-esteem a boost while simultaneously frightening him. “So what about your other brothers? Where are they?”

“The rest of them are around. Tucker owns and runs an outfitting business—”

“Outfitting? Like fashion?”

He laughed. “No, he guides hunts. And sometimes hires other guides to help.” He glanced at her. “Oh, you were kidding.”

She giggled. “Just playing. Go on.”

“And Colton owns one of the gyms in town. He got married recently, and his wife has a dance studio in the gym.”

She gasped. “Does she teach adults?”

“I have no idea.” A thought occurred to him. “They might be able to rent studio space to you if you wanted to start a yoga class.” When she didn’t say anything, he said, “It wouldn’t make you rich, but it would be something.” He glanced at her. Why wasn’t she saying anything?

She shrugged. “Maybe. Go on.”

Why didn’t she like that idea? “So then there’s Ryker. He was a firefighter, and he got injured pretty badly. He doesn’t come out much, though he does come out more since he met Frankie. Then the baby of the family, in every sense of the word, is Kash. He’s a bus driver.”

“Why did you say he was a baby?”

Oops, maybe he shouldn’t have said that. It wasn’t very nice. “He’s just always acted like a kid, but I have to say, he’s gotten a lot better since he met Bella.”

“Sounds like all your brothers get better when they meet a good woman.”

Hey, that was true! He hadn’t really put that together before. Of course, he usually didn’t sit around evaluating his brothers’ character. “Not only that, but these women have also brought us closer together. We still fight constantly, but it used to be so much worse.” He chuckled. “These women have sort of demanded that we act civil.”

“Good for them,” Nova said.

“Yeah, good for them.”



Chapter 8

The Bridge Brothers' Ranch looked just like Nova had pictured it—except there were no goats frolicking in the front yard. Gunner had done a good job of describing it, though he had not used many words. It looked old, rundown, and in need of some TLC.

The presentation did not improve when she stepped into the house. The living room was a disaster.

“Sorry for the mess,” Gunner said. “I did not realize what slob wranglers could be.”

“They live in here with you, in the house?”

“It’s not ideal, but it’s the only place I have for them. It’s a lot easier to find help if I provide room and board, and I can afford to pay them a decent wage if I let them live here. So far, they haven’t complained.” Something in his tone made her think that they might be complaining, but not in front of him. He glanced up the stairs. “They each get their own bedroom, but everything else is common area.”

She sensed that he didn’t love this arrangement.

“But your ranch is making money, right? So this isn’t forever.”

“I hope not.”

This hurt her heart. This man was working so hard, sacrificing so much to make his ranch work. “Can I do anything to help?” When he didn’t answer immediately, she said, trying for levity, “Make me earn my room and board!”

He shook his head. “Nah, I don’t want you wasting your energy on my problems.” He took a breath and looked at her, seeming to jolt himself out of his sulk. “I can show you your room so that you can put your stuff down, but don’t feel like you have to stay in your room.”

“Okay. Thanks.” She followed him up a rickety stairwell and down a dim hallway.

He seemed a bit embarrassed when he opened a door to an empty bedroom. There was a thin layer of dust on the floor, and there was no furniture in the room. She must have accidentally shown her surprise because he said, “Sorry, I forgot to mention that there’s no bed, but we have an air mattress that I can blow up for you. It’ll only take two minutes.”

She felt bad making him go to the trouble. “I have nothing against air mattresses, but it’s only one night. I can also just crash on the couch.”

He looked uncomfortable. “It’s up to you, but you won’t have much privacy on the couch. That would put you between the bedrooms and the bathroom—and between the bedrooms and the fridge.”

She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice. “Are your hands ... unsavory characters?” She was certain she could handle them, but she didn’t want to be harassed either.

“Honestly, I don’t know. They do good work, but we’re not friends. They haven’t been here long.”

“They had references, right?”

He nodded. “They did. I’m not saying they’re criminals or anything, but I just want to make sure that you feel safe.”

This warmed her heart. She couldn’t remember the last time anyone had worried about her safety. Maybe no one had since her mother when she was little. “I do feel safe,” she said and meant it. “Okay, air mattress it is, then.” Maybe she should try to stay for more than one night. He certainly wasn’t using this room for anything. Maybe she could rent it from him? She would try to find a way to bring that up.

She dropped her stuff and turned to the door. “Can I go see the goats now?”

“Sure. Oh, one more thing ... I have a rule that there’s no drinking on the property, but they frequently break that rule. So ...” He stepped out into the hallway and pointed to the closest room. “That’s me. If anyone gives you any trouble, please wake me up.”

“Good grief! Who are these guys?”

His face fell. “Sorry, when I invited you, I didn’t really think about these details. I lived alone for so long, I’m still adjusting to my new circumstances. I can give you a ride somewhere else if you want.”

She reached out and squeezed his arm. “Will you stop? I am so happy—and grateful—to be here.” And besides, she had literally nowhere else to go.

She followed him back down the stairs, through the cluttered living room, and into a messy kitchen. Dishes were piled in the sink, and it smelled like smoke. A man stood with his head in the fridge.

“I asked you not to smoke in here,” Gunner said.

“It wasn’t me,” the man said. He pulled his head out and then startled when he saw her. He gave her a goofy lopsided smile as he looked her up and down. “I’m Rocky.”

She glared, telling him with her eyes, *No way on earth.*

Gunner cleared his throat.

Rocky looked at his boss. “Do you know that there’s no food here?”

“I just filled the fridge yesterday.”

Rocky shut the door, and bottles rattled inside. “Well, I guess we ate it.”

Gunner ran a hand over his face. “I’ll go get some more.”

Rocky tipped his hat to her and went back outside.

“You’re not going to save money having them here if they eat a million dollars’ worth of food,” she said under her breath.

“I know.” Gunner sighed. “I need to limit them to three meals, but so often I’m not here at mealtime, so it’s been a free for all.” He looked at her. “But you’re right. It’s not ideal. But in my defense I have no idea what I’m doing. My father never hired hands. He had me.”

Maybe she should ask Gunner for a job. She couldn't cook to save her life, but she could clean a kitchen and keep a fridge stocked. And surely there were other things around here that she could manage. Maybe Old Yeller breaking down had been an act of providence. Maybe she shouldn't have gotten so mad at it.

He started toward the door. "Come on, goats this way."

She followed him through the back door and gasped.

It was love at first sight. A second barn, this one in better shape than the one out front, stood off to her right, and in front of her lay a giant goat pasture—full of adorable goats of all sizes, shapes, and breeds.

He chuckled, and she realized he was looking at her. "I'm glad you like it."

"Are you kidding? This is paradise!"

He laughed heartily, which made her feel good about herself. She didn't know him yet, but he didn't strike her as a man who laughed easily. He strode toward a gate, and she followed. "Do you want to go in?"

"Are you kidding? Of course I do!"

He swung the gate open and let her go first.

Goats flooded toward her, half of them screeching their greetings. She reached down and started patting them, trying to get to them all at once so that no one would feel left out. She strode deeper into the pasture and then lay down on the ground.

"Watch out for the ...!" Gunner cried.

"It's okay!" she said. She'd checked the ground for Cocoa Puffs before going down. Of course, one of the goats might hit the eject button while she was lying there, but she wasn't afraid of a little herbivore poop. The goats crowded around her, sniffing her and tickling her with their noses. One of them nibbled on her fingers, giving her one of the strangest sensations of her life. "Gosh, Gunner, don't you ever pay attention to these poor souls?"

He laughed and came closer. “All the time, but it’s never enough. They are attention gluttons.”

She rolled onto her side and propped her head up on her elbow so she could look at him. One of the goats behind her gently butted her horns into Nova’s behind. This alarmed her, and she thought about getting up, but she didn’t want to admit that she’d been naïve to lie down in the first place. She looked at Gunner. “Did you see that?”

His smile suggested that he had.

“Should I be concerned?”

He shook his head. “I’m watching them closely, don’t worry, and General Lee wouldn’t hurt a flea. We do have some cranky ones”—he glanced at the barn—“but they’re sequestered.”

She laughed. “Sequestered?”

“Yeah, they’re in goat jail in the barn. If they can’t get along with others, they have to stay in their cells. Sometimes I let them out for a little isolated yard time, but not often. I’m usually too busy.” He suddenly looked worried. “I mean, there are only two of them in there.”

“Gunner, you have saved their lives and not given up on them. I’m not going to criticize you for having a goat jail.”

His face relaxed.

“It actually sounds really smart.”

Another goat, this one’s face speckled with gray hairs, lay down beside Nova’s stomach as if they’d been best friends forever. She was chewing her cud. Nova ran a hand down her back and looked at Gunner. “Is this one of your senior citizens?”

“Not at all. She’s only about two, but she acts like an old lady. I think maybe she’s done some hard living.”

Nova laughed at his phrasing. “How do you know she’s only two? Do they come with birth certificates?”

He chuckled. “No, I can tell by their teeth.”

This impressed her more than it probably should have. “Where are the babies?”

“They are in a separate, smaller pasture. The youngest are still in the barn.”

She wanted to go see them, but she didn’t want to take up any more of his time. Surely he had other things to do, like going to the grocery store. “You don’t have to stay here with me if you trust me to hang out with them. Or even if you don’t, I guess I don’t have to hang out with them. Or I can do it from the other side of the fence.” Ugh. She was babbling. “I mean that I’m sure you still have things you were supposed to do today before you threw off your whole schedule by rescuing me.”

He shook his head. “It’s Sunday. I try to rest on Sundays, so we have all the time in the world. And I do trust you with them, but I also want to keep an eye on them. One of them might get jealous of your affections and get a little feisty.”

For some reason, Gunner using the word *feisty* delighted her in the best way.



Chapter 9

The idea taking shape in Gunner's mind felt so natural, he wondered when it had started forming. It felt like it had always been there, which made him wonder if the idea was coming straight from his Creator. Of course, his brain was also capable of reason, and in that way, he knew that the idea was patently insane.

But still, he liked it.

He had given up on marriage and a family long ago. Maybe he had never hoped for it to begin with. Gunner had never been wanted in his whole life, and he had never been special enough to expect to be wanted. So he wasn't surprised to be middle aged and single, and he wasn't depressed about it either. It was what it was, and it was okay. He had a pretty good life, and even if he lived alone for the rest of it, it would still be okay. He would make the best of it, and he would still enjoy it.

Being adopted made him believe that things could always have been worse. He'd been brought into this world by two people who didn't want him. If they had kept him, things could have been unspeakably awful. So even though his life hadn't been perfect, he was always grateful that it hadn't been worse.

So what would it hurt to make the offer? Though Nova might laugh in his face, he thought he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't take the ridicule further than that. He was pretty sure she wouldn't run around the county telling everyone what a fool he was. He could endure a little embarrassment on the off chance that she might let him fix all her problems.

"What is wrong with this goat's eye?" Nova asked. She had gone from lying in the middle of his goat pasture to sitting with her legs folded in front of her. Now she held Cooter's head in both her hands, gazing into his eyes.

Gunner knelt for a closer look. “Oh, he’s had an eye infection. Looks like it has flared up.” He stood. “Are you okay here for a minute? I’ve got some ointment in the barn.”

“Are you kidding? I’m *so* okay here. I could spend the night here!” She flung her arms out and tipped her face skyward. “I could live here!”

He chuckled. “Okay. Be right back.” He walked away thinking, could she, though? Could this hippie chick full of wanderlust really *live* here? He had no idea because he didn’t know her yet. And still, he had such a good feeling about her. Even if he took away any romantic notions—which were there, simmering beneath the surface—he still thought the idea was a good one. She was someone he liked spending time with, someone he wanted to get to know, someone who wouldn’t drive him crazy ...

Rocky, who’d been leaning on the fence watching them from afar, said, “Is that fine cream pie all yours, or can I have a slice?”

Gunner stopped dead in his tracks and slowly pivoted to face the wrangler.

The words shot out of his mouth before he considered them. “If you say one more word about her, you’re fired.”

Rocky chuckled uncomfortably. “You’re kidding, right?”

Gunner could understand his disbelief. His new boss had been nothing but calm and reasonable so far. “If you even look at her again, you’re fired.”

Rocky backed up, holding his hands up with his palms out. “Yes, sir.”

Gunner watched him walk away for a bit, just to make sure he was really leaving, and then turned to see if Nova had seen or heard any of that awful exchange, but she was too busy with the goats. Good thing. Gunner put his head down and headed for the barn.

Sometime between finding the ointment and returning to Nova, his pulse slowed. This was good. He didn’t want her to sense his fury and decide he was a dangerous lunatic.

Now Nova was closely examining Daisy's belly. She looked up as he grew close. "Is she pregnant?"

"Naw, she's just pudgy."

Nova tipped her head back and laughed at the sky.

He wasn't sure how to react as he hadn't been trying to be funny. He knelt beside Cooter to apply the ointment.

"Is that a common problem, the eyes?"

Gunner nodded. "I love goats, but sometimes I think they're not so smart. They are constantly allowing hay and other stuff to get into their eyes, and then it gets all irritated."

"Well, that's not because they're stupid!" Her voice was scalding hot.

He looked up quickly to see if she was kidding, and she wasn't. It seemed he had really offended her.

"Well," he said, "they also poop in their water, so there's that."

Her angry expression relaxed. "Okay, I guess I can't really defend that." She nuzzled Daisy. "Don't poop in your water, silly girl!"



Chapter 10

Nova wanted to see the baby goats, but she felt bad about gobbling up all Gunner's time. He had said that he tried to take it easy on Sundays, but that didn't mean he wanted to spend every second of the day watching her frolic with goats.

"What time is their supper?" she asked. She hoped that he would let her help so that they would love her more. Although they did already seem pretty fond of her.

"Are you hungry?"

She laughed. "I know you don't know me, but I'm never so subtle as to express my hunger— or anything else—so obliquely. If I wanted food, I would just ask, but you don't have to feed me. I have some gorp in my pack."

His eyes widened. "I don't know what *gorp* is"—he said the word carefully as if he were a little afraid of it— "and I still think we might be able to do better." Doubt flashed across his face. "At least, I'm willing to try." He stopped talking, and the moment grew awkward.

"So, goat supper?"

"Oh, yeah. They usually eat around dusk."

Bummer. It was nowhere near supper time then.

"But I've already fed them."

This confused her.

"They get all their supplements in the morning," he explained, "and I only do grain for the does when they're pregnant or milking. Everyone else just gets hay and water." He motioned to the grass around them. "And fresh greens, of course."

"You have milking goats?"

He nodded. "Several are nursing right now, and I'm milking a few just for personal use ..." It seemed like he was

going to say more, but then he didn't.

“For personal use, and?” She stood up and brushed off her hands.

“I was going to say that I deliver some to a few families who I think could use it, but then I figured that might sound like bragging.”

Okay, who *was* this guy, and how was he still single? “It doesn't sound like bragging, and I really want to milk a goat. When do you do that?”

He seemed surprised. “It's not very exciting.”

“Gunner, I have never milked a goat before. Please.”

He laughed. “Okay, you can help. We do it at six. For now, do you want to go see the kids?”

It took her a few seconds to remember that baby goats were called kids, but when she did, she clapped with excitement.

He laughed. “Right this way.”

She followed him across the pasture and into the barn. Her eyes had just started to adjust to the lighting when they went out the other side of the barn into a tiny pasture full of tiny goats. She gasped. This was the best place she'd ever been. She never wanted to leave. “Where are their mamas?” she asked.

“One is in the barn resting. She's not feeling so good. The others are in the pasture taking a break.”

“Gunner ...” She looked up at him. “I know it's really soon to say this, but I am in love.” Then she went and lay down among the baby goats. How had she gone her whole life without this?

They crawled all over her, stepping in her hair, on her cheek, on her stomach. One of them started nibbling on her skirt. She couldn't stop giggling. What spectacular little creatures.

Gunner was so quiet that she sat up to see if he'd left. The baby goat on her chest flopped off, but she caught him. Gunner was still there, staring at her.

“Do you breed the goats?”

He shook his head. “These mamas came to me pregnant.”

“How do you keep the others from getting pregnant? I saw some male goats out there.”

He nodded. “When I get a buck, I have him neutered immediately. Much to his dismay.”

“I've never heard of that,” she admitted.

“I don't think it's common. At least, that's what my vet says.”

She laughed. “It seems smart, though.”

“It's a little dangerous, but I can't manage to build a new pasture for each new buck. And I don't want to have a hundred different stalls in the barn.”

“Bucks can't be together?”

“They can sometimes, but I learned early on that you can't trust them not to suddenly decide on a death duel.”

Yikes. That sounded scary. “Neutering it is, then!”

“Exactly. It's the least bad option.”

She could relate to those male goats. She didn't feel like she had any good options either.



Chapter 11

Gunner hadn't thought about supper until Nova mentioned it. What was he going to feed this woman? Food had become a problem before he'd added a woman to the mix.

And he'd really been trying. He'd used some recipes and made some big slow cooker meals, and while the men didn't say anything, he could tell they weren't enjoying it. Then he'd tried some pre-made meals that he could just put in the oven. They seemed to like these better, but then he overheard them griping later, saying that they should ask for a pay raise so they could go buy their own food.

Before he'd picked up Nova, he'd been planning on frozen pizzas for tonight. Could he feed a woman frozen pizza? He was embarrassed to try it, but it might be the safest play. At least he wouldn't be putting his own lack of cooking skills on display.

Wait. If he was going to propose the insane scheme that he was thinking of proposing, then maybe it would be a good idea to fail at supper. There was no use in trying to fool her into thinking he could successfully put a meal together. She should see how things really were, see how much he needed her.

Frozen pizza it was, then.

Gunner had left Nova in the kid pasture to go do some chores, but now it was time to tuck the kids in for the night.

He found her in the same spot except that now she lay on her stomach, her cheek resting on her hands, a small smile on her face.

She appeared to be asleep.

A goat stood on her back, tall and proud. Another one was trying to climb onto her butt, but he kept slipping off. A tiny Pygmy nuzzled her hair.

Was she actually sleeping? He didn't want to wake her up. Of course, he couldn't leave her there either, and she had

wanted to help with the milking. He opened the gate and called to the kids. This usually had them running his way, but tonight they had no interest in him; why would they when they had Nova?

He was going to have to scoop them up one by one.

Or two by two, rather. He grabbed one with each arm and turned back to the barn. Nova didn't stir until his third trip.

"Oh hi!" She sat up slowly and rubbed her eyes. "I fell asleep."

He chuckled. "I saw that." He scooped up two more goats.

"Where are you taking them?"

"I button everyone up for the night."

She got to her feet and stretched. He had a hard time not staring at her.

She followed him into the barn and squealed. "There are so many!"

There were the same amount there had been outside, but they were now all inside in a smaller space. He put the two babies in his arms into their pen with their mother. They ran right for her swollen udder.

"Oh my gosh, this is so beautiful I can't stand it." She leaned on the railing and watched them headbutt their mother's udder.

"I am really glad that you're enjoying this." He leaned on the railing beside her—but not too close. "But you grew up in South Dakota. Surely you've been around young farm animals before."

"It's been a long, long time. There aren't a lot of baby farm animals on tour with indie bands." She scrunched up her face, which was adorable. "And yeah, I've been around *cows*, but they're all big and stinky. These are *goats*."

He laughed. "Did you know that you loved goats, or is this something you found out today?"

She gave his question more thought than it deserved. “I think I have always known that goats are cool,” she said slowly, thoughtfully, “but this is the first opportunity I’ve had to actually immerse myself in goats, and ...” She looked at him, and her gaze made him feel a little weak. “Gunner, you have built something really amazing here.”

Now is the time, now is the time, there will never be a better time.

He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “But I ...”

She waited patiently. He had made up his mind, but he couldn’t make his mouth say the words. *Don’t be such a wuss*, he told himself. And then he looked at her, and the obvious concern in her eyes jolted him out of his stupor. His desire to alleviate her concern overcame his paralysis.

“Nova ...”

“Yeah?”

“I have a really crazy idea.”

“Yeah?”

“No pressure or anything, it’s just an idea, but I think it might solve your—” He stopped talking when a phone rang.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Let me just check if it’s one of the kids.” She pulled a phone out of pocket. “It’s Gabby.” She answered, her voice laced with concern.

Gunner could hear the younger girl’s voice, but he couldn’t make out what she was saying. Whatever it was, it brought tears to Nova’s eyes.

“Okay, honey ... the first thing we’re going to do ... Gabby! Listen to me, please.” The girl fell quiet. “Thank you. Listen, I need you to do everything you can to stop panicking.”

The girl started talking again.

“Gabby! Let’s pray really quick ... You ready? ... You have to stop talking if I’m going to pray. Thank you. Okay, here goes. God, we know that you are Gabby’s father,” she said without closing her eyes. She was still looking at the baby goats. “And we know that you know every hair on Gabby’s precious little head. Please take away all her fear right now. Take it all away. Don’t let her be afraid tonight. Tell her that you are working everything out. Thank you, God. Amen.” Gunner had no idea what was going on, and still a lump formed in his throat.

“Okay, Gabby. I really don’t think they’re going to move you tonight. So just don’t say anything else for the rest of the night. Try to get some sleep, and if you get scared, pray.” There was a long pause. “I love you, Gabby. I’m trying to figure this out.” She said goodbye, ended the call, and leaned her head forward.

He waited, but she didn’t explain. He wasn’t used to feeling so curious about someone else’s life, and it was an unpleasant feeling—like an unscratchable itch. Finally, Nova looked up, and there were tears in her eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to infect your ranch with my drama.”

“You didn’t,” he said quickly. “What happened?”

“I guess someone was picking on Conley, and so Gabby tried to stick up for him and well ...” Nova smiled through her tears. “Apparently Gabby can be a little scary when she’s defending an underdog.”

“Good for her,” Gunner said.

“I know, but she got in trouble, and then there was talk of moving her to a different house. I don’t even know if it’s true, but she heard it, and she got scared so ...”

“Move her or move all of them?”

“I don’t know, but she’s obviously fearing the worst. So am I.”

It was as if he’d asked for a sign. “So about that crazy idea.”

“Yeah?” She’d obviously lost interest.

“Again, no pressure and you don’t even have to answer me tonight. If you think it’s a possibility, you can take some time to think about it.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. Now she almost sounded suspicious. Maybe she had a reason to be.

“What if we got married?” Simultaneously, a wave of dizziness washed over him, and what felt like a physical weight lifted off his shoulders.

She was staring at him. She looked stunned, but she wasn’t laughing. He couldn’t tell if she was considering it.

“You and me, I mean.” He wanted to smack himself. Of course she knew what he’d meant.

But she still didn’t say anything.

“You could all live here. There’s plenty of room. I could really, really use your help. We could set it up however you want. If you need to draw a paycheck, I can make that happen. Or if they’ll just accept that you are employed by the family ranch, then that works too.” He paused for a breath. “I am not the best catch in the ocean, but I’ve got a good reputation. I think it would present a good picture to Patsy or whatever her name is. How could they not let you have the kids if you’re married with a house and job? What could possibly be more stable than that?”



Chapter 12

Nova stared at Gunner, trying to process. She was the queen of crazy ideas, but this one had never occurred to her.

It was a giant idea—too big to handle all at once. It was really three ideas, delivered all at once in one wallop of a package. Each offer was spectacular in its own right, and each made some logical sense.

Since the man was apparently a saint, it made sense that he would be willing to give her shelter, and it made perfect sense that he could use her help, but why on God's green earth was the man asking her to *marry* him?

That's what she was trying to figure out as she stared up into those big hazel eyes.

"It's not like you'd be a maid, or anything," he said.

Wait, she wasn't ready for more input. She was still processing the previous batch.

"You wouldn't have to do anything you didn't want to do. You'd be my wife more than an employee. You'd have a say in everything. This would be your home as much as it is mine." He leaned away from her. "I'm not begging you or anything. I just want to give you an accurate picture."

"Yeah," she managed to say. "I didn't think you were begging." Her voice sounded funny, like it was laboring to crawl out of her throat.

"I don't want it to happen unless you want it to happen, but I really need some help around here. Just sort of managing the house, the meals ... you can cook right?"

She was too bewildered to laugh. So she'd found his only flaw. He was a sexist. Just because she was wearing a skirt, he thought she'd be able to cook?

That was a big old negatory. She couldn't even make toast without burning it. "Sure," she said.

He blinked in surprise.

Oh no.

“Sure, you’ll marry me?”

And then for reasons she could not begin to fathom, she said, “Sure” again.

His eyes widened with surprise.

She had surprised both of them. “Wait ...”

His face relaxed. He held up both hands. “Take your time.”

She wanted to ask, *Why marriage? Why not just a room and a job?* Why was he being so extreme, so ... extra?

Was this some ploy to get her into his bedroom? Was he leveraging the roof and the job to get himself some action? This made a lot of sense, but she didn’t think he was the type to do that.

As if reading her mind, his face went pale as he took a step back and said, “There would be no expectations.” He looked terrified, and she felt bad for him. “You could have your own room. It wouldn’t be like ... it wouldn’t be like that.”

She smiled in an attempt to put him at ease. “Okay,” she said. Then what on earth was it? Why was he using the word *marriage*?

And then, looking up into his eyes, she figured out *exactly* why. And the explanation made her like him even more.

This was a man of God, an actual honest-to-God believer. She hadn’t known many of those in her life, so she wasn’t used to people acting like they cared about the finer moral details.

But Gunner did. And he thought it was wrong to invite a woman into his home without her being his wife.

It all made sense.

And it was the deal of the century.

She stepped to him and threw her arms around his waist. She gave him a squeeze so good it brought tears to her eyes.

Then she let go and stepped back. “You are a good man, Gunner Bridge. And this is an amazing thing you’re offering, a miraculous thing. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. I would like to take the night and think about it, and pray about it, but I’m pretty sure I am going to accept your proposal.” She felt a little scandalous using the word *proposal*. “But will you do me a favor?”

He nodded.

“This is obviously a new idea to me, but it’s also obviously a new idea to you, right? Since you just met me today? So will you also take the night to think about it? *Really* think about it? You’re right that it would help me get the kids back, but this is no small thing for you. These aren’t your kids, this isn’t your problem, and you would be getting *married*. It’s not easy to get *unmarried*.” She laughed. “It’s not easy to unring that bell.”

He frowned. “Do you have personal experience with that?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Would that disqualify me?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I just ... I have less than zero experience with women.” He shrugged, obviously embarrassed. “If you’d already been married before, I guess I would feel even more behind the curve, but no, it’s not a deal breaker.”

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “No, never been married. Not even close. And I am overwhelmed by your generosity. Whatever happens next, thank you for the offer.”

He nodded. “I’m doing it for your family, but I will also benefit, assuming that you’re willing to help me keep this place afloat.”

Oh, yeah, she hadn’t agreed to that yet, had she? Whoops. She nodded. “I can run your house. I have absolutely no experience with housekeeping or management or hospitality, but sure, I can do it!” She jokingly shot a fist into the air.

“And I should mention that I really like kids.” He glanced at the nursing goats. “Both the human and the goat kind.” He

looked at her. “So it might sound like a big thing to take some kids into my home, but I think I would truly enjoy it.”

She couldn’t believe it. What an incredible man she was looking up at. It was too bad they didn’t have time to fall in love and get married like normal people. Did he like her like that? Did he find her attractive? Or was he just being a hero?

She had no idea, and she decided she didn’t need to know. She needed to worry about the kids.

“So, it’s time to milk a goat. Would you like a lesson?”

She put her hand to her chest and gasped theatrically. “Heavens to Betsy! Two awesome offers in a row.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Haven’t heard that one in a while.” He started walking.

“They were a punk band in the nineties. You should look them up.”

“Nah,” he said without looking back, “I’ll just take your word for it.”



Chapter 13

Gunner witnessed true disappointment on Nova's face when she first saw the milking machine. He tried to keep the laugh out of his voice when he said, "Did you think I was going to hand milk her?"

"Why, is that not a thing people do anymore?"

He shrugged. "I'm guessing the Amish still do it that way."

She playfully punched him in the arm. He pretended that it hurt—and then caught himself—what was this? He was being playful with a woman. Was this flirting? He wasn't sure, but it felt weird. He had never flirted before, at least not on purpose, not that he knew of, so he didn't know how flirting felt.

"Are you okay? Not regretting your question already, are you? Because we can pretend that it never happened."

He chuckled. "I'm fine. Not regretting anything. I was just wondering if we should give it a shot the old-fashioned way."

"Give what a shot?" She looked scared.

"The milking."

Her shoulders dropped. "Oh, yeah, definitely. Do you know how?"

He nodded. "It's not complicated, just time consuming." He grabbed the grain bucket and then let Laurie out of her stall. She followed the bucket all the way to the milking stand and stuck her nose through the headpiece. He closed it on her as she started eating.

"Is she trapped now?" Nova asked.

"She sure is. All right, let's give this Amish goat milking a try." He opened the milking machine to use the canister as a bucket. "If old Laurie here will let me."

"Laurie?" Nova giggled. "That seems like a weird goat name."

“Yeah, when I had just a few, I thought it would be cool to go with the *Dukes of Hazard* theme, but then I ran out of Hazard names.”

“So you picked Laurie?”

He looked at her. “Laurie is a *Dukes of Hazard* name. It was one of the last ones I used. Okay, ready?” He grabbed Laurie’s teat. “You squeeze from top to bottom, sort of making a wave with your fingers. It’s easier to do than to explain.” He gently pulled down as he squeezed, and a shot of milk squirted into the pail.

“Wow, that’s some good water pressure you got there, girl.”

He laughed. “Yeah, she’s a good milker.” He kept going, and the milk came out easily—but not as fast as it did with the machine. Laurie had finished her grain and tried to kick him, but he easily dodged her foot. “Now, now, girl. You behave or no cookie afterward.”

Nova laughed. “What is a goat cookie?”

He looked up at her. “I give them an animal cracker.”

Nova tipped her head back and laughed, finding that far funnier than it was.

“Do you want to try?”

“I do, but is she going to kick me?”

“She might.”

Nova tried anyway. Gunner held on to Laurie’s backside, partly to comfort the goat, and partly so that he could block any attempted kicks.

Nova did not do so well at first. “What am I doing wrong? I feel like I’m torturing her.”

He chuckled. “I’m not sure. Here ...” He put his hand over hers. “Start a little higher and then gently pull as you go.” The contact felt far more intimate than he had expected, and he pulled his hand away quickly—her body language suggested

that she had felt that intimacy too. Flustered, he went back to holding the goat's hips. "Just give it another try. You'll get it."

She did not get it at first, but eventually some milk came out, and she squealed with delight. "I did it! I actually wasn't squeezing hard enough, I think!" She kept going, and the milk started flowing. "Wow, I can't imagine doing this for a long time. Your fingers would wear out."

"I think anyone with a lot of goats would have a machine," he said.

"Except the Amish," she said.

"Correct." Now she had him wondering how the Amish really did it. They were probably a lot better at it than he was.

Nova kept milking, remaining incredibly focused on her task. He was surprised that she wasn't growing bored with it. "How do I know if she's empty?"

He took a look. "We're not there yet. Her udder will get all floppy, and the milk will just drip instead of shooting out."

Nova sighed an exhausted sigh but kept at it for so long that *he* grew bored. Finally, when she had spent twenty minutes on only one side of the udder, Gunner started to feel bad for Laurie.

"Do you want to use the machine on the other side?"

Nova stood up and stretched her back. "Sure. I think that's a great idea."

Gunner let go of the goat. "Good. So does Laurie."



Chapter 14

Praying that he would say no, Nova asked Gunner if he would like any help with the supper preparations. It wasn't that she was unwilling to help. She liked being helpful; it was just that she was not comfortable in the kitchen. Or useful. Or even safe.

She breathed a sigh of genuine relief when he said that he could handle things. "I could at least keep you company then?"

"Sure." But he didn't sound very welcoming. She sensed that he was embarrassed, which was silly. He was a bachelor. Why would he know how to cook big meals?

She watched him take the frozen pizzas out of the freezer and keep most of his body between her and the boxes, as if she wasn't going to notice what he had in his hands. Desperate to lighten the mood, she said, "Oh, whoops. I forgot to tell you that I'm a vegan."

He froze and slowly turned his head to look at her, keeping his back to her so she couldn't see the pizza boxes. "Are you serious?"

She nodded and tried to look playful. "Gluten-free, too. But don't worry. I'm sure you have some cauliflower crust pizza with cashew cheese on it?"

He stared at her, clearly suspicious that she was kidding.

She smiled. "I'm just joshing. I'll eat anything."

"Cashew cheese? Is that a thing?"

She wasn't entirely sure. "I think so?"

"Sounds disgusting. And I like cashews." He turned back to the boxes and started ripping them open. "And cheese," he added, though it seemed mostly to himself.

She watched him work. "I don't think I've ever seen anybody pre-cut frozen pizzas before."

Without turning around, Gunner said, “The only way I can get them to fit in the Crockpot.”

She froze. That had been a joke right? She was pretty sure she knew what a Crockpot was. He smiled at her over his shoulder. “Kidding.”

“Oh! I guess I asked for that one.”

“Yes, you did. But it wasn’t too far from the truth. I am trying to get many frozen pizzas into one oven.”

She tried not to stare at him, but mostly failed. How could a man be this good looking from behind? His broad shoulders made her want to curl up into his chest, a desire that alarmed her somewhat. *Slow down*, she told herself.

Rocky stepped into the kitchen, and his presence was like a splash of ice water on an otherwise cozy experience.

Gunner looked up at him and glared. Well, that was new. Maybe Gunner had felt the ice water too. It was pretty obvious that Rocky received Gunner’s glare, but after a beat he turned to Nova and smiled brightly, so brightly that it was almost disingenuous. “So, Nova! What an interesting name! Was your mother some kind of tree hugger?”

This was not the first time that Nova had been questioned about her name, and as usual she was pretty sure the asker had been drinking. “It’s short for supernova.” She kept her eyes locked on Rocky, her face deadpan, but she was pretty sure she heard Gunner chuckle by the sink.

“No way.”

Nova rolled her eyes. “My mother was seventeen. She thought she was being creative.” She looked away. As far as she was concerned, the conversation was over, hopefully forever. She liked her name. She didn’t need to defend it to this bozo.

Gunner banged the oven door shut and wiped his hands. “There. In about twenty minutes, we’ll have some food.”

Rocky snorted, and they both looked at him, expecting him to say something derisive, but he seemed to have second

thoughts.

“Would you like to go watch some TV?” Gunner asked. It was clear he was asking Nova, but Rocky said, “Sure!”

“Actually,” Nova said, “I wanted to speak to you about something private. Could we step outside for a minute?”

She felt a little guilty at how worried Gunner looked, but it worked, and as soon as they were out of earshot, she assured him, “I didn’t really need to talk to you. I just sensed that you wanted to get away from him.”

Gunner’s shoulders relaxed, and he said, “Didn’t you?”

“He seems to be a little much, but I’ll be able to put up with him.”

“You won’t have to,” Gunner said. “I’m going to fire him tomorrow.”

“Really?” She certainly hadn’t been expecting that. Was it because of her? He hadn’t done anything that bad. “Gunner, people make fun of my name all the time. You don’t have to fire the guy.”

Gunner chuckled. “It’s not because of that. He’s just not working out.”

She studied him, trying to figure out what the real reason was, but she got distracted by the chiseled perfection of his jawline. He caught her staring, and her cheeks grew warm. “But you’re going to wait till tomorrow?” She said because she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Gunner nodded. “He’s been drinking again, so I don’t want to deal with him till he’s sober. Plus, if you do decide to ride off into the sunset tomorrow, which is perfectly understandable, I don’t want your only night at the Bridge Brothers’ Ranch to be full of that kind of drama.”

“Do you really think there would be that much drama?” She was almost sorry that she might miss it.

He nodded. “There would be if I did it while he was drinking.”

Still worried that this was her fault somehow, she asked, “Is that why you’re firing him, because he broke your alcohol rule?”

Gunner took a deep breath and exhaled fully. “I have a long list of reasons to fire him and not a single reason not to.”

Fair enough. Now, if she was going to pretend to be a cook, she only had to do it for two men. And, she hoped, the kids, but she already knew they were easy to please. That’s why God had invented peanut butter and Fluff. “Do you think that you can manage with just one ranch hand?”

Gunner glanced behind him as if to make sure no one was within earshot. “I thought they called him Bull because he was a big dude, but the guy also works like a bull. I’m tempted to try it with him alone.”

“The kids might be able to help some. Gabby is only eleven, but she’s not lazy.”

Gunner chuckled ruefully. “I am not turning those kids into slave labor. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“I wasn’t worried. I just thought that they could do some of the easier chores like feeding the goats.”

“Only if they truly want to.” His words felt heavy somehow, as if there was more meaning behind them than she was aware of. He caught her studying him. “I’m pretty sure that I was only adopted to be an unpaid ranch hand. I would never do that to another kid, but if one of them takes an interest in the goats, of course I would not stop her or him from helping.”

This was good to hear.

“But only if they want to,” Gunner repeated.

Nova nodded. “I got it. I promise.”

Gunner touched her arm briefly and said, “I’ll be right back.”

She watched him walk toward the front barn and was a little sad he hadn’t invited her to follow. But then he soon

returned with two bag chairs. He shook them out and brushed them off. "Sorry, a little dusty."

"I'm not surprised to learn that you don't sit around much."

He chuckled. "I'd like to." He sat down before she did, and she wondered just how tired this man was. He caught her eye as she sat. "I'm not really the go-go-go type. At least, I don't want to be. That's why I hired those hands. I'm not really interested in working myself into a grave, even if it means saving some homeless goats."

Even though he wasn't kidding, she laughed at his phrasing.

Gunner heaved a deep sigh. "But it was work, work, work to keep my father off my back, and then it was work, work, work to keep the ranch afloat while he died, and then it was work, work, work to convince my brothers that I could keep the ranch."

"They tried to steal your ranch?" She was horrified.

"No, no," he said quickly. "They were trying to rescue me from it. Well, I am confident that they all had good intentions. Well, maybe not Kash, but he was drinking back then, so he's an entirely different person now. But anyway, they recognized how hard I was working and how tired I was, and they wanted me to sell so I could move on with my life and do something else.

His brothers might have been onto something. "But you didn't want that?"

Gunner shook his head slightly as he gazed out at the empty goat pasture. "I wasn't sure what I wanted. I was exhausted, and grieving, and confused. But I think things landed the way they were supposed to land."

She liked that idea. It's as if he had thrown some of the chips up into the air and then had been perfectly content with where they fell. She hoped that she too had just landed in the exact spot she was supposed to be.



Chapter 15

Gunner knew it had been twenty minutes since he had put the pizza pieces into the ancient oven, but he was reluctant to get out of his chair. He didn't want to have to deal with Rocky, and he didn't want to leave Nova's side.

Nova must have read his mind because she said, "We could eat out here."

"That's a great idea." He started to get up. "Sit tight. I'll wait on you."

She sprang out of her chair like a rubber band. "No, let me. Then you won't have to deal with Rocky."

He smiled down at her. Gosh, she was pretty. "Absolutely not. Thank you for the offer, but I don't trust him not to harass you. Please ..." He gestured to her chair. "I'll be right back."

Looking reluctant, she sat and thanked him.

He took a few steps towards the house before realizing that she might want something to drink, something to wash down her overly salty pizza. "Would you like a beverage?" he asked, nervous that there wasn't any left in the fridge. He had bought plenty, but the hands seemed to have wiped him out of everything else.

"Water is fine," she said.

That was a relief.

When Gunner got to the kitchen, only Bull was in there. "Do you need any help with the goats, boss?"

"No thanks. They are all tucked in and taken care of."

"All right then."

The oven beeped, but Gunner took a few more minutes to find some potholders. He wasn't worried about anything getting burnt though as the oven was ancient and could probably use a few more minutes anyway. The pizza smelled better than it would taste, but he was still embarrassed that this

is what he was serving Nova for supper. He put some on a plate for himself and some for her and then looked at Bull. “Would you mind telling Rocky that there’s food?”

Bull gave him a knowing look. “Sure, boss.”

Gunner thanked him and then headed for the back door. He wasn’t sure he was ever going to get used to anyone calling him boss. It was like he had designed his whole life to be the exact opposite of being a boss. After a whole lifetime of never being the boss of any people, he had then surrounded himself with hardheaded, stiff-necked goats, dozens of them, and almost every one of them thought that he or she was the boss of the whole ranch. He handed Nova a plate and then realized that he’d forgotten the water. He put his plate in his chair. “Be right back.” She protested, but he continued on, hoping to get back in and out before Rocky came for his grub.

It didn’t work out that way. He tried to pretend that the thug wasn’t there as he filled two glasses, but Rocky was stupid and drunk enough to say yet another untoward thing about Nova. Knowing that he would fire him in the morning, Gunner pretended that he hadn’t heard it. But then he worried that Bull had heard it. He didn’t want Bull to think he was a pushover. He stepped closer to his favorite employee and said under his breath, “I’ll deal with that tomorrow.”

Bull’s nod suggested that he knew exactly what that meant. His intuition surprised Gunner, but Gunner was encouraged that instead of looking defensive of his housemate, Bull looked relieved.

“What are you talking about over there?” Rocky slurred his words.

“Nothing,” Bull said.

Gunner headed for the door.

“Are you talking about me?”

Gunner let the screen door bang shut behind him before Rocky finished his sentence, but by the time he reached the chairs, he was second-guessing his decision to wait until tomorrow. The guy was getting more and more belligerent by

the minute. But he really didn't want to deal with kicking a drunk guy off the property. He couldn't let him drive away, and he didn't want to give him a ride somewhere only to have the guy have to come back for his pickup. No, it was best to wait till morning.

"You look annoyed," Nova said and then thanked him for the glass of water. "Did you just have another run-in?"

"It's all good," Gunner lied.

Nova laughed, disbelievingly.

"Just make sure you lock your bedroom door tonight. He's still drinking."

"I'm so sorry that you have to deal with this."

"It's okay. Like I said, finding Bull was a stroke of good luck, so overall my batting average is pretty good."

"I'm starting to believe in fate more than luck," she said.

He looked at her, not wanting to admit that he was confused. "Aren't they the same thing?"

"Maybe. What I meant is that I think God has a plan for each of us, and unless we're actively fighting against that plan, I think we might pretty much end up where he wants us."

"Gosh, I hope so."

Gunner had never believed in luck or fate, but he liked the idea of an all-knowing, all-powerful Creator orchestrating things. It sure took some of the pressure off.



Chapter 16

Nova was not the least bit scared of Rocky. She was certain he wouldn't try anything, and even if he did, she was pretty confident that she could take him. Still, she had told Gunner that she would lock the door and so she would.

But when she went to do that, to keep her promise, the lock was broken. She turned the small knob, but nothing clicked. She tested the doorknob with the lock in multiple positions, but it was never locked.

She looked around the room for something that she could push against the door, but of course there was nothing there but her pack and the air mattress. She pushed her pack up against the bottom of the door even though it couldn't have weighed more than twenty-five pounds. She still wasn't worried.

Her brain was too busy for her to feel tired, and she was sure that she wouldn't fall asleep, but with nothing else to do, she got into her sleeping bag. She decided that she would stay awake for a while, just in case Rocky decided to harass her, so she opened an eBook on her phone. It was a good one, and she was nearing the climax of the story, so she thought it would keep her awake for quite a while.

Wrong. Her eyelids grew heavy. Knowing that she was going to lose the fight, she prayed, "Please protect me and everyone else in this house, and please let tomorrow's firing go smoothly. Thank you for Gunner. I think I already know what you want me to do, so if I'm wrong, please make it really obvious. Like have him do something really awful tomorrow morning, please. But not too awful. Don't make him kick a baby goat or anything ..."

Nova drifted off to sleep mid-prayer.

Soon it was a deep sleep, and she was standing in the middle of a wide-open prairie. No buildings or fences in sight. She was surrounded by goats, but for some reason, she knew

that she needed to catch this one tall, brown one with floppy ears. She chased him around and around in circles. Other goats kept getting in the way. She would get close to the goat and then lunge for it and miss. One time she actually tripped and fell over her skirt and then laughed at herself. But she got up and started chasing the goat again.

And then, she heard breathing. Not goat breathing but heavy breathing, like someone was really tired. This sound was discordant with her situation. There was no one else there except her and the goats. She whirled around in the grass looking for the breather, but he wasn't there. Then she felt someone touch her hair, and she instantly knew what was happening. She sat bolt upright and opened her mouth wide.

She did not hesitate. She did not take time to acclimate herself to the new information. She did not question anything.

Nova screamed.

She screamed like she would if she were being dragged into a dark alley.

Trying to shush her, the man in the dark, empty bedroom clumsily clamped a hand over her mouth, and she bit it as hard as she could. At the same time, she swung her fist wildly without aiming and felt it hit flesh. The man yelled out in pain and reared back, and then she screamed again. There was a loud commotion and fast-moving shadows and then the man was gone. It looked like he'd been sucked away from her by a giant vacuum, and then she heard him hit the wall on the opposite side of the room. Then she heard a very angry man holler, "Bull!"

Though she had never heard Gunner's voice sound like that, she knew it was him, and a profound relief washed through her. Layered over this relief was a very real affection. This wasn't just any hero. This was Gunner. She heard footfall in the hallway, and then a third shadow appeared, and she started to get up so she wouldn't look quite so pathetic when the dust settled.

"What do you need, boss?" Then Bull groaned, and Nova intuited that he had figured out what had happened and was

disgusted.

“Make sure he doesn’t move. I’m calling the sheriff.”

“You’ve got it, boss.” Bull said, but it sounded like he said it through a closed mouth.

A blinding light flicked on, and Nova squinted as Gunner approached her. He ran a hand over the side of her head before pulling her into his chest. “Are you okay? I’m so sorry.”

She mumbled into his chest, “I’m fine.” She wanted to say more, but he didn’t give her a chance.

“Did he hurt you?”

She giggled, and he gently pushed her off his chest to look at her face. He seemed stunned that she was laughing.

“Sorry, it’s not funny. But, no, he didn’t hurt me. You got here too fast for that. I think I might have hurt him, though.”

Gunner looked surprised, and then amused, and then proud. He turned and looked at the thug slouched on the floor.

Rocky held his hand as if it were broken. “She bit me!” he whined.

“You sound like a four-year-old,” Bull said.

Gunner looked at her teeth, and she wondered if he was checking for blood, but he didn’t say anything. He pulled out his phone and dialed. “Hey, Bill,” he said with a comfortable familiarity. “Sorry to call so late ...” He filled him in with an impressively succinct summary. Then he thanked him and dropped the phone to his side. “Fifteen minutes,” Gunner said to Bull.

“I’ve got him, boss.”

Gunner looked at her. “Would you like to go downstairs for a minute?”

Because she sensed that’s what he wanted her to do, she said sure. He led her down the stairs to the couch and then he helped her sit down, as if she were a feeble old lady. She would have laughed, but she didn’t want to offend him.

“I would offer you a nice soothing cup of tea or something, but I don’t have any tea.”

“Do you want to serve me plain hot water?”

He stopped moving and stared at her.

“Kidding.”

He chuckled, but she sensed that he wasn’t amused this time. He sat down beside her. “Did you forget to lock the door?” he asked and then hurried to add, “I’m not blaming you!”

She shook her head. “I did lock it. I’m wondering if the lock didn’t work. Or maybe he had a key.”

Gunner laid his head back and groaned. “Of course the lock didn’t work. This old house. Nothing works. Sorry ...” He looked at her. “You were in Colton’s old room, so I didn’t know that the lock didn’t work. Ironically, the one on my door does work, so maybe we should have switched.” He shrugged. “Now that I think about it, I should have done that anyway. It was rude of me not to offer my guest a bed.”

“I was very comfortable until he came in ...” She reached over and laid her hand over Gunner’s. “I promise you, I am fine. He startled me, but I screamed upon his arrival. He didn’t do anything.”

He seemed to believe her. “That’s great to hear.” His expression turned into something like admiration. “And you have one impressive set of lungs, young lady.”

She laughed. “Thanks, I guess.”

He chuckled. “We should have you go out and have a contest with a goat sometime.”

She wasn’t sure whether or not that was offensive, but he was laughing, so she decided that it wasn’t.

His expression dropped into a sober one. “I should have fired him today. I shouldn’t have let him spend the night.”

She reached for his hand again. She didn’t want to seem overly familiar or forward, but she was desperate to comfort

him. “Gunner, you did nothing wrong. The guy is a criminal, and now he’s going to jail. This is going to make a great story ...” She caught herself. She had almost said “for our kids.”

He was still waiting for her to finish her sentence.

“For everyone,” she said lamely.

He nodded, seeming to accept that that’s what she had been intending to say. “Yeah, well, let’s wait a while before we start telling it.”

She couldn’t help it. She laid her head on his shoulder and hugged his arm. “You’ve got a deal.”



Chapter 17

As Gunner followed the sheriff's deputy down the creaking stairs, he noticed that Nova was still wide awake. She sat up straight on his couch. She didn't look at him. Instead, her eyes followed Rocky's back out the door.

Gunner couldn't blame her for still being awake. His heart was still doing its best to thump its way out of his chest, and he hadn't even been the one attacked.

They stepped out onto the porch, and Gunner thanked Bill one last time before watching him roughly escort the fired hand to the cruiser. Gunner didn't go inside until the taillights disappeared into the darkness.

When he finally went back into the house, Bull stood looking out the window. Apparently he wanted to see the guy vanish too.

Gunner nodded to him. "Thank you for all your help tonight. I know that wasn't in your job description."

"No sweat. And I know my job description is flexible." His lips twitched in something resembling a smile, but it was a pretty subtle one. "Do you need anything else from me tonight, boss?"

"No, thank you. See you in the morning." Gunner glanced at the couch and wished that he'd thought to whisper. Nova had lain down and closed her eyes. Gunner grabbed a blanket and gently draped it over her. He pulled it up to her chin, careful not to wake her.

Then Gunner found a second blanket and sat in a wing chair nearby. He could go to bed. He needed some sleep, and the threat was over, but he couldn't quite make himself leave her. He watched her sleep, marveling at how natural her beauty was. She wasn't the classical beauty with bleach blonde hair and a dainty heart-shaped face, but she was still something to behold—maybe even better than classical beauty. She had a wild strength to her, and her beauty felt organic—

reminding him of a strong spring breeze that carried the scent of wildflowers.

It occurred to him that it might be creepy to stare at her while she was sleeping. He didn't want her to wake up and scream at the sight of him, so he made himself look away. He slouched in his chair and closed his eyes knowing that if he could just sleep for half an hour, he would be in far better shape than if he didn't sleep at all.

He awoke disoriented with no idea how long he'd slept, but the sun hadn't come up yet. He found his phone, saw the time, and decided he might as well get started on his day. He was going to be down a hand, maybe permanently.

He went into the kitchen and made a large pot of coffee. He didn't know when his two houseguests would wake up, but in case it was soon, he wanted them to have fresh caffeine waiting for them. He started for the back door but then thought maybe he should leave Nova a note. He didn't want her to think that he'd had second thoughts and taken off running for the hills.

He spent too long looking for a piece of scrap paper and then gave up and decided on a paper plate instead. He wrote, "Out in the barn. Come on out if you want." Then he stared at his note for far too long, wishing he had something more eloquent to say. But eventually he gave up and propped the paper plate up on salt and pepper shakers in the middle of the kitchen table.

Only then did he worry that Bull might think the note was for him, which would be unbearably weird. Bull might quit.

So, Gunner took the plate down from its perch and prefaced the note with "Nova," before stepping back to survey his work. Still not great, but better. He glanced into the living room one last time to see if she had stirred, and she hadn't.

So he went outside to start his morning chores. He wanted Nova to keep sleeping so she could wake up rested, but he was also excited for her to wake up so he could talk to her again.



Chapter 18

A discordant chorus of goat vocals woke Nova well after sunrise. Yellow light poured in through the large old windows helping her to remember where she was and why she had slept on such a lumpy couch. She sat up and stretched, marveling at how threadbare the armrests were. This poor man needed a new couch.

She was relieved to find Gunner busy with chores because as she had fallen asleep last night, she'd had an idea, and now with the fresh wisdom of morning informing that idea, it seemed like a good one.

But her van was still at the mechanic's, and she was kind of stranded. She looked out the front window to see three trucks in the yard. One of those likely belonged to Rocky, right? So maybe she could borrow it? He probably wouldn't be missing it anytime soon.

But then she saw Bull sliding things around in the bed of another truck.

She visited the bathroom and then hurried outside. "Good morning!" She tried to sound as chipper as she usually did. She was definitely a morning person, but this was a weird morning.

Bull looked at her sheepishly as if he wasn't quite allowed to do so.

"Can you do me a big favor?"

He looked over her shoulder in the direction of the back pastures and the rear barn, as if he were afraid his boss was going to catch them doing something untoward.

"Could you give me a ride to the Bannon Ranch?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't know where that is."

"I can show you," she said quickly. "It's not far." Well it kind of was but not in western miles.

"I don't know..." He glanced behind her again.

“Look, I’m not running away. I just have to run an errand.”

“Have you seen Gunner this morning?”

She shook her head. “I’m kind of in a hurry.” She was losing patience.

Bull sighed. “Okay, but if Gunner gets mad, I’m telling him that you forced me.”

This was laughable. The man was a giant. She couldn’t force him to do anything. She hopped into the truck, waiting for him to slide behind the wheel before saying, “After your help last night, I don’t think Gunner’s going to be mad at you for a while. Thank you for that, by the way.”

She waited until they were well under way with the Bridge Ranch shrinking in her side mirror before asking, “So, they call you Bull, but surely that’s not the name your mama gave you?”

Bull gave her a small smile and looked at her out of the side of his eye. “My *mama*? Did I just detect a southern twang?”

“Not on purpose. I’ve been on the road for years with musicians and groupies from all over the country, and I’ve picked up a lot of their mannerisms. I don’t do it on purpose. Let me try again ...” She did her best to fake an aristocratic British accent. “What Christian name did your parents assign you at birth?”

He laughed again. “My name is Simon.”

“Simon. That’s a nice name. At the risk of offending you, would you prefer that Gunner call you by your name?”

Simon gave her a curious look. “If you’re looking for a way to throw your weight around, this isn’t a good one.”

That wasn’t what she was doing, not at all.

“I’m fine being called Bull. It suits me.”

She didn’t quite believe him, but she wasn’t going to argue.

“So this is it.” Simon whistled when the Bannon Ranch came into view.

Nova hadn't been here in a long time, but it looked the same as she remembered it—and it was still a busy place. People and horses moved to and fro across the giant yard, and one dog ran around as if he were in charge.

“Thank you for the ride,” she said as soon as the truck stopped. She put her hand on the door handle.

“Are you sure? You really want me to just leave you here?”

Was he angling for an invite? “You want to stay with me?”

His eyes widened in something like horror. “Not really, but...”

Oh, so maybe he was just worried about her. “I'll be fine.” She got out of the truck and turned to face the main house. That had to be where Brooke lived now, right?

Nova had been friends with Brooke Winding since they were toddlers. They had briefly reconnected in church over the last few weeks.

Nova had been kind of bowled over by the fact that Brooke had married a Bannon. That seemed to go against everything she knew about her old friend, but love was a weird thing sometimes. They hadn't had much chance to talk in church, and that was more her fault than Brooke's. She didn't like being around the Bannons. They made her feel somehow less than, and she didn't have the energy for that right now.

No one was paying her any mind, as if strange women showed up in their yard all the time. She didn't want to be so presumptuous as to knock on the front door, so she strode toward the barn, trying to look purposeful, and hoping to run into someone who could help her locate Brooke.

A handsome man with long, dark, silver-flecked braids stepped out into her path. His worn cowboy hat somehow made him look regal. “Can I help you?”

She smiled brightly, trying to look like she belonged there. “Hi, my name is Nova Silvernail and I’m an old friend of Brooke’s. I just got back into town, and I was wondering if she was around.”

The man looked somewhat amused, but he was hard to read. “Let me go check.” He held up one finger. “One minute.”

She watched him walk toward the large main house and then subtly trailed him. She didn’t want him to worry that she was going to follow him into the house, but she didn’t want to stand there twiddling her thumbs either.

The man went inside, and Nova tried to be patient as she waited.

She didn’t have to wait long.

The man reappeared and waved her inside. By the time she reached the door, Brooke had filled it. She had a toddler in one arm, and she wrapped the other arm around Nova, pulling her in for a hug and a squeal. “It’s about time you came to visit!” Brooke released her and shut the door before waving her into a living room with too many people in it. Nova managed to suppress a groan.

“Nova, you remember Finn and Grace.”

Finn smiled.

Grace smiled at her and held up her left hand. “We’re married now!”

Wow, it seemed marrying a Bannon was the thing to do these days. “Congratulations.”

“And this is my stepson, David,” Brooke said.

The lanky teenager looked far too old to be Brooke’s stepson, but Callum had been quite a bit older than them—maybe even the same age as her Gunner.

Brooke offered Nova a seat. “It’s awesome to see you, but I don’t have much time. I’m riding into Rapid with Callum in a little bit. We could plan for some other time, though?” When Nova didn’t immediately answer, Brooke added hastily, “I know you’re busy, so it doesn’t have to be soon.”

Nova cleared her throat. “I would love to get together, but I’m here this morning because I...” She really didn’t want to do this in front of an audience, even a small one.

Brooke’s eyes questioned her.

“I just wanted to ask some advice.”

“Okay!” Brooke said brightly. “About what?”

Finn rubbed his hands together and said, “I give excellent advice.”

His wife elbowed him gently. “No, you don’t.”

The teenager got up and wandered away, probably bored. Nova couldn’t blame him.

“Can we keep this between us?” Nova asked. She was trying to think of a tactful way to get Finn and his wife to leave, but she was failing.

Brooke’s smile fell away, a look of sincere concern replacing it. “Of course.”

Nova took a shaky breath. “I was wondering what you could tell me about Gunner Bridge?”

Brooke’s expression didn’t flinch.

Finn scowled a little.

“Gunner Bridge,” Brooke repeated slowly. “I don’t really know him. He was older than us.”

Nova nodded, feeling impatient. “I know. I also know that you married Callum, and I think they’re about the same age, so I guess what I’m really asking is what Callum can tell me about Gunner Bridge.”

“I can certainly ask Callum,” Brooke said after a brief hesitation. “Anything in particular that I’m supposed to be asking him?”

Nova didn’t know how to answer that. “I guess I’m just wondering what kind of man he is.”

Brooke stared at her. “As in a boss or something ... else?”

Both, Nova thought.

It appeared that Finn was sucking on some sour candy. Grace was studying him, leading Nova to assume she wasn't the only one who couldn't read that expression.

"What?" Grace said. "If you have something to say, spill it."

Finn chewed his lip. "I don't want to badmouth anyone."

"Please," Nova said, the urgency in her voice surprising her. "This is a big deal. If you know something, please tell me. You could be saving me a lot of suffering. I don't need politeness right now. I need honesty."

Finn stared at her, and she could almost feel his wheels turning. Finally, when she'd just about given up, he said, "Okay, I guess now I should say something because if I don't you will imagine something worse than what I was going to say."

This was somewhat comforting.

"I don't know Gunner well, but I know the Bridge family. Everyone does. And they're just not very ..."

"Very what?" Grace pushed.

Nova was grateful that Grace was here and helping her with this mission.

Finn squirmed. "Nice?" He winced. "That's not the right word."

"They're not very nice?" Brooke repeated.

"Right. They're just not friendly."

Brooke scowled. "A lot of them have been coming to church lately, and they all seem nice. Gunner is the one who sits in the back row, right? I don't know if he's nice. He never talks."

Finn shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe people change. But the dealings I've had with them suggest they're not super friendly. The youngest one has been a complete womanizing drunk, and Colton is so arrogant that he has a permanent crick in his neck."

Grace looked confused.

“From holding his nose in the air,” Finn muttered.

“Anyway,” Brooke said, “let’s say that we don’t know. I can ask Callum, but we might not be able to help you here. Nova, are you ... you know ...”

Nova sighed. She really didn’t want to get into this, especially not with people beyond Brooke. “Maybe,” she said.

“Really?” Finn didn’t bother to try to hide his surprise. “Have you *talked* to the guy?”

Nova sat up straighter, suddenly feeling incredibly defensive of her favorite stranger. “I have.”

“And he’s talked back?” Finn said.

“He has.” Nova tried to keep her tone pleasant, but she mostly failed.

“Why do you sound so surprised?” Grace asked Finn.

“I don’t know. Gunner is just kind of ... well, I mean, he’s always sort of been something of a big dumb oaf. What kind of a guy lives alone in the middle of nowhere with a zillion goats?”

Okay, this was a mistake. Nova stood. “I’m sorry.” She looked at Brooke. “Let’s get together sometime. And if Callum has anything helpful to contribute, I’d love to hear it.” She started toward the door.

“Wait!” Finn jumped up. “I’m sorry. I’m being a jerk.”

Yeah, he kind of was.

“I admit that I don’t know the Bridges well. I’m basing a lot of this on what I’ve heard, and I shouldn’t trust that. So if you’re asking about him, then you probably already know him better than I do.”

“Yeah. Okay, thanks.” She started toward the door, and Brooke followed her out of the house.

Nova wished that she hadn’t. She didn’t want to admit that she’d come here without any way of getting home.



Chapter 19

“What do you mean you just dropped her off at the Bannons?” Gunner said.

When Bull stepped back from him, Gunner realized he was being a bit more aggressive than he wanted to be. He didn't want to be cross with Bull, especially not after how helpful he'd been the night before. “Sorry,” Gunner said. “I just don't understand. What would she want with the Bannons?”

Bull's face showed sympathy. “I don't know. I argued with her a little, but she seemed bent on getting there and then staying there alone.”

Gunner stared at the man, waiting for more, but Bull didn't offer more.

“Did she say who she was looking to talk to?”

Bull said no. “I kind of got the impression that she wasn't picky, that she was just looking for a Bannon, and that most any Bannon would do.”

A small fear had been trying to find purchase in Gunner's brain, and with this comment, that fear grew talons and latched on.

She was looking for help—help from someone other than him.

He took a steadying breath, thanked Bull, and then walked away, trying to calm himself down. Of course she would go to the Bannons. It made sense. Everyone within a thousand miles went to the Bannons when they needed help.

The Bannons helped everyone. That's what they did. That's who they were.

Nova had slept on it, and then she'd decided that she didn't want to marry a weirdo stranger goat man. Why would she want that? Why would anyone want that? She was desperate, sure, but not that desperate.

But why hadn't the Bannons offered to help already? They'd been in church when Nova's situation had been described. Or maybe they *had* offered. He wouldn't necessarily know about it. Not only were the Bannons helpful, but they were discreet about it. Maybe Nova just hadn't taken them up on it until she realized how much worse things could get.

Gunner told himself that this was a good development. More than anything, he wanted what was best for Nova, and for those kids. If that wasn't him, then he would survive. He could easily slide back into the life he'd lived before Nova. He was comfortable with solitude. He and Bull could keep eating frozen pizza.



Chapter 20

“Nova, wait,” Brooke Bannon said.

Nova stopped.

“Have a seat. Take a load off. I’ll go find Callum.”

Nova sat on the Bannons’ front steps and resigned herself to wait. She was annoyed until she got distracted by the horses working in the arena. What beautiful creatures they were. Majestic even. If she married Gunner and lived on a ranch, maybe she could ride horses around. That alone was reason to say yes to this crazy scheme.

Brooke came back wearing a smile that warmed Nova from head to toe: Callum had said nice things.

Brooke sat beside her. “I’m so glad that I made you wait.” She laughed. “So, Callum instantly started singing Gunner’s praises. He said that Gunner was kind and selfless and had the work ethic of a good horse.” Brooke chuckled. “That’s high praise coming from Callum.”

“I can imagine. Anything else?”

“I asked him about what Finn said, specifically the phrase *big dumb oaf*, and he got really defensive. He said that people have definitely made that assumption about Gunner, and that no, he’s not going to be teaching any calculus classes, but it wasn’t fair to call him dumb. He said, and I quote, ‘Just ’cause a guy doesn’t feel the need to prove to everyone how smart he is, doesn’t mean that he’s dumb.’”

Nova felt her chest swell with pride for the man she hardly knew—the one she was about to marry. “That’s pretty poetic there, Callum.”

“He has his moments. He also said that Gunner has kept that ranch running since he was a teenager, and that no dummy can pull that off.”

“Wow,” Nova said after a moment. “Thank you, Brooke.”

“You bet. Now are you going to tell me what’s really going on here?”

Nova definitely didn’t want to do that. “Just between us?”

“Of course.”

Nova sighed. “You know the situation I’m in with the custody of my siblings.”

Brooke indicated that she did.

“Well, Gunner needs some help on his ranch, and he has offered to marry me so that I can live with him, and so that we can convince child services that I am capable of caring for those kids.” Only a few words into her sentence, she regretted starting it.

She could hear her words through Brooke’s ears, understand them through Brooke’s experiences, and knew what Brooke was going to say.

“Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds?”

Nova’s blood started to simmer. “I’m sure it sounds crazy to you with your PhD and your billionaire husband, but I live in a van.”

Brooke didn’t say anything, and Nova wondered if she’d been too harsh.

“I’m sorry, Nova. I didn’t mean to judge you.”

They were quiet for a moment as Nova tried to calm down. “I know,” she finally said, “but I really need to be a mom to those kids. I don’t want them going to some stranger. I am what’s best for them. And what’s so bad about marrying a friend? People used to do it all the time. What was it called in the olden days?”

“I don’t know, an arranged marriage?”

That wasn’t the one she was thinking of. “He is kind, he likes kids, he needs my help ... it sounds like a pretty good deal to me.”

Brooke clicked her tongue. “It does sound pretty convenient.”

“Marriage of convenience!” Nova almost yelled.

Brooke laughed. “Oh yeah.” She sighed. “Nova, let me talk to Callum first. Maybe there’s something we can do to help.”

“I know you have a gazillion dollars and all, but I’m not sure that gives you any pull with child services.”

“I wasn’t suggesting we were going to bribe a child services employee,” Brooke said, sounding a bit testy. “I was thinking maybe we could help you find a place to live—”

“No, thank you.” Nova stood. The hurt look on Brooke’s face brought instant guilt. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“What’s the difference between accepting help from us and accepting help from Gunner?”

She was overwhelmingly certain that there was a difference, but it took her a few seconds to figure out what it was. “Gunner needs my help. It’s a mutual benefit.” She looked up at the giant house in front of her. “You guys don’t need anyone’s help.”

“Nova ...”

“Besides, he’s hot.”

Brooke’s eyes widened. “Oh, you actually like him?”

“Of course I like him. I wouldn’t marry someone I didn’t like.”

Brooke stared at her. “Well, that changes everything. You might have led with that.”

Grace came out onto the porch carrying a giant purse and moved around Brooke to go down the steps.

“Taking off already?” Brooke asked.

“No, just running into town.”

“Can I catch a ride?” Nova asked.

Grace looked surprised but readily agreed.

Nova wasn't sure how she'd get out to the Bridge Ranch once she made it to town, but at least she'd be that much closer.

Once they were bouncing down the unpaved driveway, Grace said, "I'm glad we're getting this chance to chat because I wanted to tell you to ignore Finn."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He really wasn't trying to be malicious. He doesn't understand it when people aren't as bubbly and goofy as him."

Nova laughed. "I guess I never thought of Finn as bubbly."

"Oh, believe me. There are bubbles." She sighed. "So, so many bubbles."



Chapter 21

Gunner felt someone watching him and looked up to see Nova standing in the middle of his barn. He nearly jumped.

“Sorry,” she said, “I wasn’t trying to sneak up on you.” Something in her tone made him do a double take, and then something in her expression made him stare. He was no expert on the wily ways of a woman, but was she being ... coy?

She stepped closer. “Do you have a minute?”

He did. “I would have given you a ride to the Bannons. How did you get back?”

“Grace.”

Grace? As in God’s grace had teleported her?

“Grace Bannon. Finn’s wife.”

“Oh.” He’d never really bothered to keep track of the younger Bannons. He really wanted to ask why she’d gone there, but it wasn’t any of his business.

“I went to visit Brooke. She’s an old friend of mine.”

Well, that wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d imagined.

“I went to ask her what she knew about you.”

He winced. That was scarier. But Brooke wouldn’t say anything bad about him, right? He and Callum got on pretty well.

Nova stared at him, waiting for him to say something.

“And what did Brooke have to say?”

“She offered to help me find and pay for a place to live.”

Gunner’s heart sank.

Nova stepped closer. “But I said no, thanks ... because I would rather marry you.” One more step toward him, and now she was so close that his skin vibrated. “Did you give it some thought last night?”

He hadn't, not really. He hadn't needed to. So he stared at her dumbly without answering.

She smiled up at him. "Okay, let's do it, but on one condition."

Part of him feared what this condition might be? A rock band coming to live with them? A house full of cats? Naming their first kid Phoenix? But another part of him knew that he would say yes to whatever this condition was. He cleared his throat. "Okay," he managed.

She smiled. "You said there would be no physical expectations, but I can't agree to that."

What? He froze. Not only was he unable to speak, he couldn't breathe.

"That's not a marriage, and I'm not going to sentence you to a lifetime of celibacy. We have to at least *try* being intimate." She stopped, giving him a chance to speak, but he had forgotten how. "Do you find me attractive, Gunner?" She stared again.

He had to answer this time, or she might think that his answer was no, which it most definitely was not.

"Yes, of course," he said, and his voice sounded like he'd just swallowed a flaming sword. "You're beautiful."

She smiled. "So are you. So let's give it a shot. Let's be married in every sense of the word." She shrugged. "We don't know what is going to happen, but no one ever does, right? I've heard of couples dating for years, doing all the right things, being oh so sure, and then their marriage was a complete catastrophe."

Yikes. He didn't know anyone like that, but he was pretty sure he'd never had a single person tell him about their marriage—ever.

"So, how do you want to do this? Do you want to fly to Vegas? Or should we just go ask the pastor for a quick favor?"

He had no idea how to get married quickly. He didn't know how to get married at all. "Don't we have to get a

license or something?”

She nodded. “I think so, but then I think we can get married as soon as we have it. So I think we could get it done today ...” She glanced around the barn. “If you have time.”

Something was bothering him, and it took him several seconds to pinpoint it.

“Or we could wait,” she said when he didn’t speak for a while.

“Nova, don’t you want to have a real wedding?”

She frowned. “Do you think Priscilla would be more convinced by a real wedding?”

It took him a second to remember who Priscilla was. No, he definitely hadn’t been thinking about her at all. “No, but I thought all little girls grew up dreaming about their big day and their big dress ...” Knowing he sounded like a fool, he stopped talking.

She smiled and leaned into him. “Oh, Gunner, haven’t you figured out yet that I am not like other girls?”

Uh, yes, he had noticed that. “Does that mean you don’t have your dream wedding all planned out?”

“Yeah, that’s what that means. I have never really wanted to get married. And if I did, I always figured it would be to some emotionally unavailable rock star.”

Gunner winced.

She giggled. “I’m not saying I *want* to marry an emotionally unavailable rock star. I just thought I might be in danger of ending up like that.”

He was glad that he was at least protecting her from that. “Are you sure about this?”

She smiled brightly. “I’m so sure. Once you know me a little better, you’ll believe me but for now, please take my word for it.” Her eyebrows furrowed. “Is that okay with you? Did *you* have dreams of a traditional wedding?”

That was worthy of a real belly laugh, but he didn't want to make her feel stupid. "Definitely not." It had been a long time since he had allowed himself to think that he would ever get married at all.

"Okay then. Let's do it." She sounded legitimately excited.

"When?" he asked.

"Right now?"

"Right now?" he repeated.

"I don't want to rush you, but all I care about right now, no offense, is getting those kids under the same roof as me so that I can love and protect them."

Gunner could understand that. "Okay. I guess the first step is to go get a marriage license."

"And then what? Who should marry us?"

He shrugged. He had no idea.

"I think the mayor can do it," she said.

"I think the mayor might have other things to do today."

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "Just how busy do you think the West Hope mayor is?"

"Okay," he said. "I might have another idea. But first, let's go get a marriage license."

"Wait," she said. "We might need a witness to."

This sounded like a real thing.

"Do you want to invite one of your brothers?"

Not really.

She stared at him, waiting for him to say yes.

He understood why she had suggested it. It made good sense to someone who didn't know his brothers, but the pickings were slim. He didn't want to invite Kash because he didn't want to tolerate the ribbing for the rest of his life. He couldn't invite Tucker because Tucker would freak out about the financial risks of this arrangement. And he thought Colton

was probably too busy to take an hour off in the middle of the day. And Denver was in New Mexico. “Ryker,” he said.

She nodded eagerly. “Okay, let’s call Ryker.”



Chapter 22

Nova felt like she was living in a story that someone else was writing. She stood in the church basement with one man she barely knew and two she didn't know at all.

Earlier, Gunner had made a very brief phone call to a long-retired youth group leader—not *Gunner's* former youth group leader, as Gunner had rarely gone to youth group and couldn't remember who his leader had been, but Colton's youth group leader.

Apparently, Nick Townsend had gotten ordained by some online church so that he could marry Colton and Adeline. If it worked for those two, apparently Gunner thought it would work for them.

Nova thought it would have been simpler to just go to the mayor's office, but Gunner said they should involve God as much as possible in this deal, so he wanted to get married in a church. By a pastor—sort of. She was glad he hadn't decided to go with their actual pastor. He'd obviously considered it because he'd given her a horrified expression and said, "He would make us do premarital counseling."

She didn't have anything against premarital counseling, necessarily, but they didn't have time for that.

But maybe this was all supposed to be because Nick was very excited to come out of his recent retirement for another Bridge Brother wedding. And he wasn't acting like they were both insane for doing this. He hadn't yet asked for an explanation. He probably thought she was pregnant.

The other man she didn't know was Gunner's brother Ryker, who stood scowling in the corner. Every time she looked his way, she caught him looking at her suspiciously.

"All right, if you're ready, I'm ready," Nick said.

Gunner cleared his throat and nodded.

"Should we go upstairs?" Nick asked.

Gunner nodded again but then quickly looked at her for input. Better late than never, she thought. She didn't care if they got married in the sanctuary or in the kitchen, but it was obvious what Gunner wanted, so she pointed at the ceiling.

Gunner exhaled in relief. He was nervous. She couldn't blame him. He had a thousand reasons to be nervous.

On the way up the stairs, Nick asked, "Do you folks have vows prepared?"

Gunner had said no before she'd fully processed the question. "Can we just do something traditional?"

"Of course," Nick said. "What about Scripture? Anything in particular you would like read?"

Again Gunner said no quickly. "Let's just get this done." He made it sound like an unpleasant chore, but she wasn't offended. He was right. They had to get this thing done so they could get to Priscilla.

"Okay, let's do something traditional then." Nick took his phone out and started tapping on the screen. At first Nova thought he'd made some notes, but then she realized he was actually Googling traditional wedding vows. She bit back a laugh. Good grief this was going to be a story for the kiddos. The thought surprised her. It had been a long time since she thought about having kids of her own, but looking at Gunner made the idea seem irresistible. She didn't know him that well yet, but she knew that this was a man who deserved to have kids to love and kids to love him. It was easy to envision how much those little ones would look up to their big tough ranching daddy.

They reached the sanctuary, which was pretty without all the lights on, only the daylight filtering through the stained glass. Her belly did a little flip, and it wasn't nerves.

This is your wedding day, a weird voice whispered in her head. It was weird because it didn't sound like her usual voices; this one was new. Yep, this was her wedding day, and this made her a little sad. She'd never once dreamed about a wedding day. She'd always been far too bohemian. She had

never wanted to get married, and she'd figured that if she ever did fall so hopelessly in love that she couldn't avoid it, then she'd get married on a whim in a field somewhere with her bare feet in the mud.

But she was in a church. This was it. She wasn't going to get to do it for real. Ever. And that was okay because she was doing it for the kids. But it was still a little disappointing. It was still a little sad.

Because it wasn't real.

You don't know that yet, the voice whispered—and she had to admit that the voice was right. Ever since her mother had gotten sick, things had been moving so fast that Nova's head had been spinning like a top.

She didn't know anything about anything yet.

Nick turned and faced them. "Are you ready?"

She pivoted to face Gunner, and the look on his face did two things: make her giggle and take her breath away. She giggled because he looked pale. She stopped breathing because this man was gorgeous. His looks probably wouldn't make him stand out in a crowd, but he was just so classically handsome and so *rugged* looking. He was all man, this one—and he looked scared. She reached out and took his hand. "Ready," she said to Nick without taking her eyes away from Gunner.

His lips curled into a small smile. "Yeah. I'm ready too."



Chapter 23

Nick cleared his throat. “Okay, let’s begin.” He looked down at his phone and then began to read from some wedding script he’d found. Gunner didn’t even bother trying to focus on the words. He was too busy looking down at the beautiful woman who was holding his hand.

He felt a little guilty, like he was getting away with something, like he was tricking her into something. But he wasn’t. He’d been completely honest, and his intentions were pure. Still, he felt like he was getting the better end of the stick here. A kind, fun, gorgeous woman to call his wife and three kids to run around and enjoy the ranch? It was an insta-family. People would pay big bucks for this kind of thing.

The look in her eyes was making his knees weak. What was she trying to do, peer into his soul? But then Gunner realized that Nick was looking at him too—they were both staring at him. Gunner glanced at Ryker. Yep, him too. And Ryker had worry in his eyes.

Gunner knew he’d missed something, but this was his wedding. He couldn’t exactly say, “Huh?”

Nova stepped closer to him and grabbed his other hand. Now she held both of them. She caressed the back of his fingers with her thumbs and whispered, “All you have to do is say *I do*—unless you don’t.” Her eyes sparkled with life.

“Yeah, I do,” he said quickly and heard Ryker exhale.

Sounding a bit amused, Nick asked Nova if she wanted to be his wife, and she smiled so brightly it rivaled the sun. “You bet I do!” She let go of one of his hands to shoot a fist into the air, and Ryker laughed.

Oh good. Gunner had been worried that Ryker wouldn’t have a good time.

Nick told Gunner to repeat after him, and even though Gunner had asked for traditional wedding vows, now he

interrupted the man. “If you don’t mind, I’m just going to wing it.”

Nova’s eyes widened at the words, which emboldened him, and Nick waved at him to go ahead.

Though it took some fortitude, Gunner managed to look into her eyes.

They rendered him speechless.

The four of them stood there in silence, and Gunner knew they were wondering if he planned to say anything, but Nova didn’t look impatient. She just kept smiling.

“Uh ...” Gunner managed. *Get it together* ... “I am usually a man of few words ...” He cleared his throat. “But I thought these should be my words. So, here goes. I know that the circumstances that brought us together were not ideal. And I’m not saying that I’m glad they happened. But I am sure glad to be standing here with you. So I don’t ever want you to question this or to wonder about my commitment here. Hard things brought us here, but that doesn’t mean that our future can’t be awesome, and I’m going to do everything I can to make that happen. I will be the best husband that I can be.” Suddenly, Gunner was very tired, and he thought about stopping there, but there was more that he wanted to say, wasn’t there? Had he even made an actual vow yet? He took a big breath. “So I promise to love you, help you, honor you, cherish you, and protect you as best I can for the rest of my life.”

A tear formed in her right eye and popped out onto her long lashes, and it was all he could do not to wipe it away. He looked at Nick. “That’s it. I’m done.”

Ryker laughed again.

Nick smiled at Nova. “Would you like to wing it too?”

She nodded and then muttered, “You might be a man of few words, but you sure do know how to make them count.” She took a big breath. “Okay, so I am not sure how to follow that, but I just want to say thank you. Thank you for everything. Thank you for rescuing me. Thank you for

opening your home and your heart to the kids and me.” She squeezed his hands. Her eyes brightened as if she’d just thought of something. “But I want you to know,” she said quickly, “that I’m not feeling desperate right now. I’m not feeling like I *have* to marry you. One thing about my personality is that if I ever feel trapped, I will run like the wind.” She paused and smiled gently as if she knew he would need a moment to process what she was saying. “So please know that I’m marrying you because I want to marry you. There is no place I’d rather be right now. And I also promise to do my best to love you and help you ... and ... I forgot everything else you said, but yeah, I will love you, Gunner Bridge, and I’m so, so glad that Old Yeller broke down when and where she did.”

The rest of the brief ceremony went by in a blur. Ryker gave them their wedding bands, and they each put one on the other. Gunner was glad his hands weren’t shaking when they did so. And then Nick was telling him that he could kiss his bride, and he wondered why it hadn’t occurred to him earlier to worry about this.

Suddenly, this scene—the four of them standing in a sanctuary with the lights off—felt so public. Was he really supposed to kiss this woman here in front of these men? He hardly knew her! And did she even want him to kiss her? Should he just give her a respectful peck? No, that might hurt her feelings. He wanted to kiss her for real. He didn’t know if she wanted him to kiss her, but he didn’t want her to think that he didn’t want to kiss her.

Oh boy. He felt like he was drowning.

But then the smile started to slide off her face, and her eyes widened just a little as if she were considering being afraid of something—and then Gunner’s instincts took over. He grabbed his new wife around the waist and pulled her into him and kissed her like his life depended on it. Whether she wanted this particular kiss or not, he was never going to let her think that he didn’t want her.

As if it were coming from far, far away, he heard someone clapping, and someone laughing, and then there was some

chitchat fading away—but Gunner just kept kissing his wife.



Chapter 24

Nova and Gunner sat in a small waiting room, waiting for someone to lead them to Priscilla's cubicle. Nova didn't need to be led. She'd been here before. She knew exactly where it was. Trauma had burned it into her brain, but apparently family services didn't want angry people wandering around unchaperoned.

She hated to admit that this made some sense.

Gunner sat stiffly beside her. She could feel his discomfort coming off him in waves. She attributed his uneasiness to where they were and what they were about to attempt—but then he said, “I feel like a husband should be holding your hand right now.”

Her chest filled with a surprise so sweet it made her eyes water. He stared back at her with eyes full of tender concern.

She'd been so focused on the practical steps that she needed to take to get the kids back that she hadn't given any thought to the new reality that she was married to this man, that she was a wife, that she had a husband. “Well,” she said, trying to keep her voice light, “a wife who is basically losing her mind right now with anxiety would be very grateful for a husband who would hold her hand.”

His lips twitched in a smile, and then he reached over and wrapped his warm hand around hers, sending an entirely unexpected shiver through her entire body.

She hadn't realized how giant this man's hand was. His skin was rough but pleasant, and she was no longer feeling impatient with Priscilla's schedule. Now she was content to sit here for a while.

But that didn't happen. A frazzled looking woman appeared in front of them. “Right this way.”

Now the nerves attacked Nova's stomach again, and she wished Gunner hadn't let go of her hand.

He's your husband, a small voice whispered in her brain, and she grabbed his hand again.

Priscilla sat behind her cluttered desk with a pinched look on her face. She looked up when they appeared, but she did not greet them.

Nova forced a smile. She was sure that it looked horrible because she never faked anything, but she didn't think an honest glare would do much for her cause.

"I wanted to let you know that I have found housing and an awesome job. I now have plenty of rooms for the kids, and I can support them easily."

Disbelief tried to take over Priscilla's expression before she could rein it back in. She glanced at Gunner as if she didn't understand how he fit into the story. Nova didn't think she owed this woman any explanation, but she gave one anyway. She hooked her arm through Gunner's. "This is my husband, Gunner Bridge. He owns a ranch in town."

Now disbelief won the battle. Priscilla's wide eyes flicked back and forth between their faces. Then, "I'm sorry, what?"

"I just wanted to let you know that I can provide complete care for the kids now, so I'm updating you on things."

She stared for a long time before saying, "You're married."

Nova nodded. "Right." She held up her left hand.

"I'm going to need to see to see something a little more official than that."

Nova had been expecting this. She pulled the manila folder out of her bag and handed it over. Grudgingly, Priscilla flipped it open and then stared down at the document for a long time.

Nova knew that she wasn't studying the document. She was pretending to study it while she considered her next move.

Finally, as Nova was pleasantly daydreaming about that humdinger of a wedding kiss, Priscilla closed the folder. She looked up at Gunner. "How long have you known Ms. Silvernail?"

“Long enough,” he said gruffly.

Priscilla narrowed her eyes at him as she picked up a pencil and centered a notepad on her desk. “I’m going to need you to be more specific than that.” She pursed her lips as if she’d caught him in a net.

There was no net.

“We grew up in the same church,” Gunner said.

Priscilla didn’t like that.

“And how long have you been dating?”

The quickness of his response stunned Nova. “We haven’t been dating. When I learned that Nova had moved back home and wanted to settle down, I asked her to marry me before anyone else could snatch her up.”

Priscilla was growing more miserable by the second, and Nova was relishing it even as she knew she shouldn’t be. “Why don’t you two have a seat.” It was more an order than an invitation.

Nova sat, and Gunner moved his chair closer to hers before slowly lowering himself into it as if he didn’t quite trust it. Then he reached over and grabbed her hand again.

Nova didn’t think it was possible to be in love with this man yet, but she was gaining on it every minute.

“So tell me about the job.”

Gunner was on a roll, so Nova looked to him, silently asking him to take the lead.

He didn’t need to be asked twice. “There are a hundred jobs on the ranch. Nova can help me with most of them. I can put her on the payroll if you need a paper trail. But the kids will always come first, so I will never ask her to put working ahead of their welfare.”

Finn couldn’t have been further off. This guy was no big, dumb oaf.

Priscilla shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m having trouble believing that this all happened organically.”

“It doesn’t matter how it happened,” Gunner said. “We care about each other, we are committed to each other, we are legally married, and we live in a giant house. A safe house. A house with heat and hot water and food. A house where kids will be provided for, protected, and loved. What more could you possibly want for them?”

Priscilla leaned back in her chair, looking a bit defeated.

“Well, I will need some time to consider these new developments. And I’ll need to come see the home, naturally.”

Nova felt Gunner grow angry.

“You can do all that with the kids in their sister’s house,” he said through a tight jaw.

Priscilla pursed her lips again. “They are safe where they are. I will not be bullied into rushing the process, Mr. Bridge.”

“I don’t bully anyone,” Gunner said, his voice eerily level, each syllable coming out on the same note. “Do you know Frank Bender?”

Some color drained from her face. “Are you threatening me?”

“I don’t bully *or* threaten people, ma’am. Frank’s daughter, Jenna, also an attorney, is my sister-in-law. If those kids aren’t sleeping under our roof tonight, Frank will be giving you a call.”

“That was a threat.”

“It was not. We are giving you as much information as we can so that you can make the decision that is best for the kids.”

“I can’t possibly get them there by tonight.”

Gunner stood, taking Nova’s hand with him. He didn’t pull on her, but he didn’t ease his grip either. “We want them there tonight, for their own good.” He paused. “We could go pick them up if that would simplify things for you.”

Uh-oh. Nova didn’t have her van back, and he didn’t have room in his truck. Was he planning to bring the livestock trailer?

“That will not be necessary.” Priscilla looked at Nova.
“What is your new address?”

Nova had no idea. She looked at Gunner again, and he rattled it off. Priscilla rolled her eyes, but she wrote it down. Then she looked up at Gunner. “They will not be here tonight. Call your lawyer if you want to. I’m not scared of lawyers.” She looked at Nova. “I will call you with my decision once I’ve had time to make it.”



Chapter 25

When Gunner put his hands on the steering wheel, he realized they were shaking. This embarrassed him, and he tried to steady them, hoping Nova hadn't noticed.

That had been the most unnerving fifteen minutes of his life. He really hadn't liked that woman. He'd felt her looking down on Nova, felt her looking down on *him*, and she didn't know anything about him.

Her attitude had brought a rare rage out of him, and he hadn't enjoyed that feeling one bit. How dare she be on some power trip when there were kids involved? How dare she flex her power at the expense of these kids? Even if they were the kindest foster parents in the world, they still weren't family. These kids were grieving their mother, and this woman was forcing them to do it away from the only other family they knew.

He had to stop thinking about it. He was only getting angrier.

"I had no idea you were so eloquent," Nova said, sounding awestruck.

"I'm not," he said and chuckled. "I think that was mostly God."

She looked at him quickly. "Mostly God?"

"Yeah." Gunner was too overwhelmed to care if she thought this was weird. It was a little too late for her to back out now. "I prayed before I went in there that I wouldn't have to talk. Then I felt guilty about that prayer because if you needed me, if those kids needed me, then I didn't want to be unwilling to speak." He took a breath. "So I prayed that if I should talk, then God would give me the words."

"Uh ... yeah. I would say he did."

"Yeah, he did."

"Doesn't that happen in the Bible to someone?"

His understanding was that it had happened to a lot of people in the Bible, but he didn't want to make her feel bad. "You mean Moses?"

"I don't know. Anyway, thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I guess I need to bone up on my Bible knowledge if I'm going to be raising kids, huh?"

"I would imagine that it would help, yeah." His hands were finally starting to calm down, for which he was grateful.

"Do you really have some scary lawyer on call?"

"No. I do know him, and whether she is scared of him or not, there's no way that she'd want to deal with him."

"Why is that?"

"The guy is a pompous pine cone."

Her guttural snicker made him feel good about himself.

"Anyway, whether I could get him to do anything or not, I know his daughter Jenna would help. She's not technically my sister-in-law yet, but that's how I think of her. I didn't mean to lie. It just came out that way. I know she will marry Denver eventually. Anyway, I know she'd be on a plane in a heartbeat if we called her."

"Maybe we should call her."

"Yeah, maybe we should." He wasn't looking forward to telling any of the brothers about his new bride just yet. Ryker had been a good sport, but Gunner didn't expect similar treatment from the others.

"Believe it or not, she's usually much ruder than that to me," Nova said. "Your presence alone made her treat me better."

His stomach cramped. "That's obnoxious."

"Yes. It is."

They were quiet for a minute, and Gunner was grateful. He needed a break. But the quiet made him aware of a new

problem. “We should get some groceries in case they really do show up tonight. And I don’t know what you like to cook. I’m assuming that you’ll want me to fill the pantry with something other than frozen pizzas.”

“You keep your frozen pizzas in the pantry?”

He gave her some side eye. “You know what I mean.” Last winter he’d been so skimpy with the heat that he probably could have kept the pizzas in there, but he would do a better job of heating the house if there were kids in it. “What kinds of things do you like to cook?”

She waited so long to answer that he wondered if she’d heard him.

“What do you like to eat?” she asked.

“At this point, I would be pretty excited for anything other than frozen pizza.”

“Oh yeah? You want some hot dogs?”

He laughed. “Sure, if that’s what you want to cook.” She still hadn’t answered his question, but he didn’t push. “Are you up for a trip to the grocery store?”

“Sure.” She didn’t sound sure.

“Not a very exciting honeymoon, sorry.”

“Don’t be crazy. I’m so grateful to you, the last thing I’m going to complain about is the lack of a flight to some tourist trap.”

He shifted in his seat. He wished she’d be a little less grateful. It’s not like he wasn’t getting anything out of this arrangement. “Well, maybe once we’re settled, we could go on a family vacation. Take the kids somewhere not touristy.”

She didn’t say anything, but she was smiling dreamily. He’d take it. He couldn’t imagine how busy her mind must be right now.

The grocery store parking lot was packed. This might take longer than he’d thought.

“What’s going on?” she said. “Are we expecting a blizzard?”

Gunner laughed. “I hope not. I know that this is South Dakota, but I think we have until at least September before the blizzards start.”

Chapter 26

NOVA'S CHEST WAS SO tight that it was difficult to get a full breath. She wasn't used to this. Her old life had been stress-free. She had purposely built it that way.

Of course, she was willing to endure stress if it meant being able to care for those kids, if it meant honoring her mother—but this stress wasn't because of the kids.

This stress was because she had lied. She had let Gunner believe that she could cook at least as well as the average woman. And it was too late to come clean now because: he had already married her.

If she confessed, wouldn't he be furious? The whole point of this deal was that he would give her room and board, and she would cook for Bull and him.

It hadn't felt like a lie when it had started because she was pretty sure she could figure it out in time. He wasn't going to be in the kitchen watching her, making sure she was a confident natural. She had planned to learn how to cook one meal at a time. That's why God made YouTube.

But that's not the way things were working out.

She didn't have any time at all.

Right this second Gunner was walking her into the grocery store.

She couldn't Google a week's worth of recipes between here and the door.

What was she going to do?

She had no idea what she was going to make and even if she did have an idea or two, she didn't know what ingredients those meals needed. Well, she could probably guess that she had to buy noodles if she was making spaghetti. And pasta sauce. But would he expect her to make her own sauce? It was going to be heard to sneak jars of Ragu past him if he was the one putting them in the cart.

He grabbed a cart, and her stomach somersaulted. She was going to have to come clean. *No*, her stubborn streak piped up. *You can do this. Just think.*

He looked at her. “What do you like to make?”

“Spaghetti!” she blurted out.

He laughed, and reared back a little. “Okay, the woman loves her spaghetti.” He nodded. “What else?”

Uh-oh.

She pretended she hadn’t heard him and continued into the store. The cart rattled along closely behind, so close that she feared for the safety of her Achilles, so she sidestepped out of the cart’s path. Gunner kept on pushing—straight for the produce section. Oh good, she was pretty sure she could put a salad together. She was a big fan of salad bars. This wasn’t so different.

He stopped pushing. “Do you like salad?” she asked.

“Not particularly, but I will eat it.”

She smiled, hoping she didn’t look like a Nervous Nellie, and started dropping vegetables into the cart.

“That’s a lot of veggies,” he said. “Do the kids like salad?”

She stopped and turned to look at him. “Sorry, I should have asked about budget.”

He shook his head. “I’m not worried about that, but I don’t think we should get Bull used to lobster or anything.”

She laughed nervously and looked around the store. She was pretty sure they didn’t sell lobster here. And then she wondered how many lobsters a man Bull’s size could eat, and she shuddered.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

She shook her head quickly.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt. Gather as many salad supplies as you need.” Only then did she realize the sheer quantity of vegetables she had already placed in the cart. It

would be hard to feed any group this many vegetables before they went bad. She reached in and removed one of the extra-large bags of celery and casually placed it back on the shelf like it was a common thing for her, like she unshelved and reshelved bags of celery every day.

“I figured you were using that to beef up the spaghetti sauce.”

She frowned. Celery in spaghetti sauce? Was that a thing? Was she supposed to be putting celery in her pasta sauce? Not knowing what to say to that, she hurried away.

“You didn’t get any tomatoes!” he called after her.

She turned back. “The kids don’t like them.”

“Oh ...” He caught up to her. “I meant for the pasta sauce ...”

Her stomach sank. No Ragu for her.

But he read her mind. “You know what? I’m an idiot. The only cook I knew was my mom, and so I’m picturing the way things she used to do things, and that’s not fair. She had no budget at all, so she made everything from scratch, but that would be utterly stupid for you to do.”

She exhaled and dropped her shoulders.

“I mean, if you *want* to make things from scratch, you are welcome to, but only if you enjoy that. Don’t ever feel like you have to do things the hard way. We’re not running a restaurant here.”

Thank God for small favors.

“We’ll get some jars of sauce. What else do you like to make, other than spaghetti and salad?”

She tried to think of what she bought for herself to eat on the road. “Sandwiches,” she blurted out.

“Oh, good point! The kids will need lunch food.” He started moving again. “And sandwich supplies is good because Bull can make his own when he feels like it.”

Right, because *that* was why she’d thought of sandwiches.

He turned for the deli. “Why don’t you go get some bread while I wait in line for the meat slicer. What kind of cold cuts do the kids like?”

She had no idea. She’d been feeding them peanut butter and Fluff. “I think they’ll eat anything, and we’ll want to get some peanut butter too.”

“Of course. Sorry, I’m not around kids much, though my niece Polly is fond of SpaghettiOs.”

“No need to be sorry, and SpaghettiOs are good.” She left him and went to hunt for the bread aisle. When she found it, she longed to go shooting right out the other end of it, out into the parking lot, and onto the road.

That’s how the old Nova would have handled this situation. But the new Nova had three kids to take care of. And apparently, a new husband to consider.

Every time this thought popped into her mind, it startled her as if it were brand-new information.

This was going to take some getting used to.

She found the bread, grabbed three loaves, put one back, and then headed for the deli. On the way she saw the peanut butter and popped into that aisle for some store-brand creamy and a tub of Fluff.

As she put these items into the cart, guilt washed over her. “I feel like we’re spending an awful lot of money.”

“We can work out a budget going forward. Right now I just want to make sure that the kids come to a house ready to feed them. Having lots of food to eat always made me feel safe when I was a kid.”

She looked at him. He didn’t look sad. He’d shared that detail very matter-of-factly, but still she wondered what had happened to him when he was little to make him feel that way.

It seemed he was waiting for her to say something. “I hope the kids show up,” she said, “or Bull is going to be eating a lot of salad.”

Gunner chuckled. “And a lot of peanut butter.”

She looked up sharply. “Do you want me to get a smaller jar?”

His expression softened, and he reached for her hand. “Will you please relax? No, I was not saying that. I just didn’t realize peanut butter came in five-gallon buckets.”

She tried to laugh, tried to relax.

He jiggled her hand. “Hey, I’m serious. Please don’t worry about any of this. Oh, wait, are you stressing because we don’t have Priscilla’s answer yet?”

Oh yeah, *that’s* it. “Maybe,” she said.

He let go of her hand. “Sorry. I guess I can understand that. But I have a really good feeling that they’re going to show up. And if for some reason they don’t, I really can call Frank Bender.”

She hoped it wouldn’t come to that. She didn’t have any money for a flashy attorney.

It was Gunner’s turn at the deli, and he ordered a variety of sliced meat and cheese.

After thanking the deli worker, he turned to her. “I should mention that we have a lot of beef in the freezer.”

Oh no. She didn’t know what to do with frozen beef.

“All kinds,” he said. “Steaks, roasts, and hamburger.” When she didn’t get excited, he said, “Do you not like beef?”

“No, no, I do. What do you like to eat? What do you want me to cook?”

He shrugged and looked around the store. “I like tacos.”

“Great!” She could probably manage tacos. “Let’s find taco parts.”

They traveled around the store doing that, and she started to feel some hope, but then he said, “I like pot roast too.”

Nova didn’t know how to make a pot roast, exactly, but at least she knew what was in it. “I guess we need to go back to the carrot aisle.”

He glanced into the cart. “We might have enough carrots. But we can go get some potatoes.

She wanted to cry. Never in her life did she think she would be undone by potatoes.



Chapter 27

Gunner understood why Nova might be feeling a little out of sorts, but she was acting like she had a phobia of grocery stores.

“What else do you like to eat?” she asked him again.

“I would rather you pick out what you like to cook or what the kids like to eat. I’m pretty easy to please.” He’d never been particularly good at reading people, but she seemed to be trickier than most. What exactly was she planning to do with three dozen green peppers? And why were they standing in the middle of the aisle in a grocery store? She stared at the floor as if there were recipes written down there. He shifted his weight to his other foot. They had to get out of the middle of the aisle. People were starting to stare.

“Do you like burgers?” he asked.

“Burgers?” She looked up, her wide eyes suggesting she’d never heard of such a thing.

“Burgers,” he said. “Nothing fancy. Meat and buns. Maybe some cheese. Maybe some fries to go with it?”

“Fries!” she cried as if she’d just thought of something. He waited for the big reveal.

“My mom used to make the kids fish sticks and fries. They love those!” Her face fell. “Of course, that’s not really something somebody cooks.”

He knew what she meant, but he said, “I don’t want to eat them frozen!” in an effort to make her laugh.

His effort failed.

She looked at him, her eyes so earnest that it hurt him. “Do grown men eat fish sticks?”

Not really, but he said, “Sure. Bull will love them. Let’s go.” He headed toward the frozen food aisle.

She easily picked out some fish sticks, but then she seemed rather smitten by the frozen meals in bags. She stood there staring at them for a painfully long time before looking at him and saying, “Do you like stir fry?”

“Sure.” At this point, he would eat raw Rocky Mountain oysters if it meant getting out of the grocery store.

“We could have stir fry and put your beef in it.”

“Sure,” he said again. He expected her to grab some bags of frozen stir fry, but she spun on her heel and made a beeline for the produce section. Good grief, this woman really loved her vegetables.

She threw cabbage, broccoli, and zucchini into his cart and then said, “Okay, so we have four suppers now, right?” Her eyes lifted to meet his. “Three more to go?”

“We don’t have to get a whole week’s worth of food—”

She read his impatience. “I’m sorry. I’m taking too long.”

“Not at all. I just don’t want Priscilla to show up with the kids and find only Bull at home.”

“Oh.” She stared at him.

“But you should know that I don’t have any seasonings at home other than salt and pepper.”

“Seasonings?”

Didn’t the woman use seasonings? “I didn’t know if you wanted any for the stir fry.” This reminded him of another problem. “I’m not sure how much oil I have either. And I think I only have vegetable oil.”

She looked confused.

“I didn’t know if you wanted to get something a little more exciting.”

“Exciting,” she repeated slowly.

Because he couldn’t fathom what was going on in that female brain of hers, he went to the cooking oil aisle, where she spent at least five minutes staring at the options. Finally,

she reached out and grazed her fingers against a bottle. She looked at him. “Olive oil is good, right?”

“Sure.” He was pretty sure that all cooking oils tasted the same. To him, anyway. He thought that different oils performed differently at different temperatures, had no idea which oil was the best for stir fry, but was sure she knew more about it.

She plopped a tiny bottle of olive oil on the stack in his cart.

“I told you to stop worrying about money,” he said.

“Okay.” She wiped her hands on her shirt. Were her palms sweating for some reason? She smiled up at him. If she wasn’t picking out the travel-sized olive oil to save cost, then why was she doing it? He decided he didn’t need to know and made a mental note to buy more oil soon.

He hated to stretch this little shopping spree out any longer, but he really wanted the kids to feel safe when they got to his house, so he said, “What about snacks?”

“Snacks!” she cried, sounding more excited than she’d been in hours. “Good idea!” She looked around. “Where is the snack aisle?”

“Well,” he said slowly, “that depends on what kind of snacks. Do they like salty things or sweet things or ...” He tried to think of what he’d seen Bella feeding Polly. “Maybe cheese sticks or yogurt?”

“Yes,” she said.

He chuckled. “Okay then, let’s go find some salty and sweet cheese and yogurt.”



Chapter 28

Nova was still learning the local landmarks, of which there were few obvious ones once she got out of town and headed to the ranch, but she thought they were almost back to the ranch when she got a text message. Fearing it was Priscilla, she braced herself as she looked.

“Oh, thank God.” The words gushed out of her before she’d realized she was going to speak.

“I told you,” Gunner said, though she hadn’t told him yet what the good news was. This was sweet, and she was glad that the text was from Priscilla and not someone else. She didn’t want to disappoint him.

“She says that the kids will be at the house in a few hours, and that CPS will do a home inspection then.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, liked she’s going to fail us once she’s already brought the kids there.”

“I can pick up and clean ... or do anything you think we need ... I can work fast.” Her brain was spinning.

“The house is a bit messy, but I’m pretty sure it will pass a child services inspection. Just be careful of the back door. Some of the goats try to sneak in, and I don’t want General Lee to headbutt Priscilla in the butt.”

Nova laughed. “Would she do that?”

“There was a time I would have said no, but General’s starting to get a big head. The more goats we add, the more she thinks she’s in charge.”

“Is she?” Nova asked after a moment.

“Sort of, yeah. That’s why we don’t want her in the kitchen.”

“Fair enough.”

“Oh no!” he cried suddenly.

She'd never heard him sound alarmed, despite giving him plenty of reasons to be. "What is it?"

"We don't have beds!" he cried.

Her stomach fell so fast that it made her dizzy. How had she not thought of that?

Gunner pulled onto an old ranch road. For a second, she thought it was a short cut to a rural bed store, but then she realized that he was only turning around.

"Does West Hope have a furniture store?"

"It does," he said, sounding stressed for the first time. "But it's very small. I don't even know if they'll have three mattresses."

She felt sick. Had they gone to all this trouble to lose because they were too far from a bed store? "Do we have time to get to Rapid?" She knew the answer to this, but she hoped Gunner had some insider knowledge, knew about some local wormhole or something.

Gunner glanced at his dash. "No, since we'll have to get all the beds into the house and up the stairs, and we'll probably have to put the frames together. CPS probably wouldn't be impressed if we just throw mattresses on the floor."

She was sure they'd seen worse. "I've never been so happy to have Bull around," she said.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Is Bull good at putting bed frames together?" He sounded completely serious.

"I have no idea, but I meant that I could see him hoisting a mattress onto each shoulder and taking the stairs two at a time."

Now he looked at her squarely. "Don't go sounding too impressed with Bull's physical strength."

Despite her stress, she laughed. It didn't make her feel less stressed, though. "Are you jealous already, husband?"

He narrowed his eyes at her, and she thought he was trying to be playful, but if she didn't know him the little that she did, the expression would have been fearsome. No wonder Priscilla had been scared of him.

"Don't worry," she said, "it never occurred to me to value a man according to how many mattresses he could carry up the stairs."

"You know now that I have to outdo him in this mattress contest no matter how many hernias it earns me, right?"

"Please don't. I think we have enough to worry about right now without adding hernia care."

"I'll wear one of those weightlifting belts." When she didn't laugh, he added, "Sorry, I have no idea what they're called. I've never lifted weights before." He paused and then mumbled, "At least not on purpose." He heaved a big sigh. "So, what do we need? Just three basic twin beds?"

Something churned in her stomach. "I think so, and I had another thought ..." She tried to think of a way to express it without making him uncomfortable.

"Are you going to share it with me?" He didn't sound impatient, only curious.

She took a long breath. "Sure. I was just thinking that if we're trying to convince her that we're really married ..."

"Then we shouldn't buy you a bed," he tried to finish her sentence.

That hadn't been what she was thinking. She would never ask him to buy her a bed. "Actually, I was thinking that we should try to make it look like a woman hangs out in your bedroom. I mean, I've never been in your bedroom, but I'm assuming it doesn't look like a woman lives there."

He groaned. "I'm not sure how we're going to pull that off in the next few hours."

"Me neither, but you know part of a good marriage is the ability to problem solve."

"Oh yeah?" He didn't sound convinced.

“I mean, that’s what I’ve heard anyway. What color is your bedspread?”

He groaned again. “I don’t actually have a bedspread. And I really don’t ever want you to see the blanket that I use. It’s older than I am.”

“So maybe we start with a pink blanket.” She looked at him. “Does the bed store sell comforters?”

He sighed. “I have no idea. Do we need pink curtains too?”

She giggled. “Maybe. Do you have two nightstands?”

He shook his head and groaned for the third time in two minutes. Or maybe it was just a continuation of the second groan. “We’re going to need to rent a trailer.”

“Does the bed store sell trailers?”

He really laughed at that one, which she hoped made him feel better.

Buildings came into view, signaling the edge of town. “What side of town is the store on?”

“The wrong one.” He accelerated, though they were approaching a reduced speed zone. She silently prayed that they wouldn’t get stopped for speeding. They didn’t have the time. And she was afraid that after Gunner bought three beds, a comforter, and curtains, then he might not be able to afford a speeding ticket. “Maybe we can push the bed against the wall. Then it will look like we only need one.”

“That works for me,” she said.

Gunner started cutting through side streets and then spilled out onto another main road. Not long after that, he pulled into a tiny parking lot. Without hesitation, he backed up to the loading dock. “Let’s go get this done.”

He waited for her to get out of the truck, but just barely. Then he speed walked them into the store.

He hadn’t been kidding when he’d said it was small, but a friendly looking gent approached them immediately. He was a small man, and she hoped he wasn’t in charge of the loading

dock. “Let me know if you need any help,” he said in a jolly voice so deep that it seemed his body couldn’t have room for a voice like that.

“We need help,” Gunner said abruptly. “What’s your most inexpensive twin mattress?”

He rattled off some numbers that made Nova flinch, but Gunner didn’t react at all.

“And does that price include the frame?”

The man’s small face fell. “It does not.”

“Could it?”

He shook his head, looking uncomfortable. “We don’t usually do that. We’ve already got a slim margin on the price of the—”

“I know you own the store, John. Don’t act like you have to consult someone in the back.”

The small man named John smiled, but he still didn’t offer to negotiate.

“What if we bought four?” Gunner interrupted.

John startled. “Four bed frames?”

Nova focused on a crack in the floor. Why was Gunner asking for four frames? To be nice? To be patient? To give her options? Or had she been presumptuous when she’d thought he wanted her in his bedroom?

Gunner sighed, showing a little impatience. Nova hoped John didn’t notice. She didn’t think it would help the negotiating.

“Four mattresses and four bed frames for the price of four mattresses,” Gunner explained.

John appeared to be considering it.

“And one queen mattress and frame as well, for the price of the queen mattress. Cash and carry. And we’re not done shopping.”

Nova's head spun. So he was also getting a new mattress for his room? He really didn't need to do that. She hoped he was doing it for Priscilla's benefit, not hers. What money they'd saved on their impromptu wedding was quickly being gobbled up by their interior design efforts.

John laughed and shook his head as if he were admitting that he'd been outwitted and was enjoying it. He thrust out his hand. "You got yourself a deal. What else can I help you with?"

"Could we have a look at your nightstands?"

"Right this way." He swept his hand in invitation.

They had exactly two choices, and Gunner told her to pick. She didn't care, and she couldn't see the price tags. "Whichever is cheapest."

John pointed. "So two of these?"

"One of those," Gunner said shortly. "And do you carry bedding?"

"Bedding? You mean like blankets and linens?"

"I mean like one pink comforter."

John's confusion deepened. "Pink?"

"Or purple," Gunner said.

"No, sorry. I don't have any comforters."

"Do you know anyplace local that would carry comforters?"

He shook his head. "I think you'll have to go to Spearfish for that."

Yeah, they definitely didn't have time for a quick jaunt to Spearfish.

"You might be able to find something at the thrift shop."

"Okay, ring us up, please." Gunner practically ran to the register.

Nova hurried to catch up with him. "Pillows," she muttered.

“I don’t think they’re going to have any.”

“Pillows?” John said. “We have some!”

They had pillows, but no blankets?

“We’ll take five,” Gunner said.

By the time the man returned with the pillows, Gunner was tapping his toes. There wasn’t any music playing, so if he was tapping along to a catchy beat, the song was only happening in his head.

Nova nearly cried when she saw the price of the pillows run through the cash register one at a time, but she bit her lip. If she questioned it, she would only slow down the process, and she was pretty sure Gunner would still go through with the purchase.



Chapter 29

Gunner had spent a *lot* of time in this thrift store. His mother had worked so hard to pinch pennies, he'd gotten nearly everything he needed after someone else in town had discarded it.

In a lot of ways, he'd fared better than his brothers. They'd gotten his hand-me-downs. So the youngest kids often wore coats that had already been worn by five or six other kids.

She'd lightened up when she'd gotten to Kash. It had felt like they'd suddenly had more money to play with, but now that Gunner had seen how hard it was just to break even with cattle ranching, he wondered if it was more of a case of his mother running out of energy.

Maybe she'd decided it wasn't worth the hours and hours of coupon clipping and had just bought her youngest son a few coats.

Kash had always had less duct tape on his winter boots too.

Despite all this life experience, Gunner was still a little embarrassed to be leading his new wife into the thrift store. Unlike his mother, Gunner *could* afford new sheets and blankets—he just didn't have time to get to the store and back. So he tried not to think about where he was, and he tried not to be ashamed of that pesticide-plus-moth-balls smell.

“Okay ...” Nova stopped walking and scanned the large but still cluttered store. “Where might the bedding be?” She sounded overly chipper for the situation.

He pretended to consider her question. He didn't want her to know that he knew exactly where they kept the sheets without thinking about it. But then he felt disingenuous, and he did *not* like feeling like that, so he said, “This way” and led her deeper into the junk-pile jungle, hoping that maybe they'd reorganized the store in the years since he'd been here.

They had not.

And as he'd feared, the pickings were slim.

Nova chewed her lip as she studied them. "Well, they definitely don't need to match."

"Good thing," he grumbled. After a moment of bewilderment, he said, "I don't know why we're staring. There are only two choices."

"You're right. I guess I was hoping that someone else would drop something off."

He laughed. "Well, let's grab the two they have."

She looked at him, her eyes worried. "Are you sure?"

He understood her hesitation. One of the choices was a flannel sheet covered in faded roses.

"What if we got a flat sheet and just tucked it in?" she said.

"Do you *see* any twin flat sheets?" Because he didn't.

"Yeah." She pointed down at a single tangled sheet sandwiched between two afghans.

It was pink. And stained.

He growled. "I can't do this." He took a step back and looked around. "I don't have another plan, but this isn't happening." He wasn't going to welcome these kids into his home with stained floral moth ball sheets.

She touched his arm. "It's really okay. It's not forever. I'll go to Walmart just as soon as I can."

He shook his head so hard that his neck popped. He rubbed at it as he said, "No." He clearly remembered how hand-me-downs had made him feel—and they hadn't made him feel wanted.

And he'd never had to deal with hand-me-downs this awful.

"Okay, let's stick with the flat sheet theme." She side stepped to put herself in front of the king sheets, where the selection was more substantial.

“Of course. Why didn’t I think of that?” Good, now he felt stupid too.

“We’ve sort of had a lot to think about lately.” She grabbed a baby blue sheet and shook it open. She held it up for inspection. “I don’t see any red flags. Do you?”

He chuckled. “No. It looks like it’s never been used.”

“Good.” She crumpled it up and shoved it into his chest.

He laughed as he took it. And then he watched his new wife tear the king-sized sheet shelf to shreds in pursuit of another prize.

She found one—this one blood red—and slapped it into his chest without looking at him. “Check that,” she ordered.

Amused, he unfolded the sheet to make sure there wasn’t a dead hamster hiding inside a crease. By the time he’d finished his check, Nova was inspecting a hot pink number that still had creases from the package. She curled her lip. “This one is scratchy, but it looks brand new.” She tucked it under her armpit and grabbed for another. “Hey, look! An actual fitted sheet!” She looked at him. “This would fit the queen!” She sounded unreasonably excited.

She didn’t wait for him to agree. She just balled it up and shoved it under her arm with the other. “Okay, that’s good for fitted. I’m assuming we can save top sheets for when we go to Spearfish?” She hesitated, and her cheeks grew a little pink. “Or I can go to Spearfish alone. Anyway, top sheets?”

He shook his head. “I think top sheets can wait.”

“Good. Let’s see if the blanket selection is any better.”

He turned to look at the blankets behind them, but she spun around three times before noticing that the blankets had been stacked opposite the sheets all along.

“Oh.” She gasped.

“How does Conley feel about camo?” Gunner asked.

“He loves it.” She said this with such enthusiasm that he thought it likely that she was trying to be ironic. She grabbed it

off the shelf and shook it out for inspection. A giant ball of hair fell out—

Thinking they'd finally found the hiding hamster, Gunner jumped back and let out a little yelp that he wished had sounded manlier.

Nova, who hadn't startled at all, seemed to find the hair ball a disqualifier because she shoved the blanket back onto the shelf. "He hates camo."

She decided instead on a faded floral comforter—what was it with these bedding designers and their ugly roses; a blue comforter that had been ripped and patched with pink fabric so that both genders would hate it equally, and a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle throw that wouldn't reach a tall kid's toes.

"Those stupid turtles were popular when I was a kid," he said. He'd meant that it was an old blanket, but he didn't think he'd clearly communicated that message because she flung it over her shoulder and said, "Well, now they're making a comeback." She looked at his armload and then up at his face before saying, "We should have gotten a cart."

Yeah, he would have thought of that if this store had carts. "That's it, though, right?"

She shook her head. "Pillowcases."

He groaned. He wasn't sure he had the energy for pillowcases.



Chapter 30

Nova wasn't sure what was wrong with Gunner, and she feared that he might be regretting some of his recent decisions.

He'd looked to be on the verge of tears when she'd held up the turtle blanket.

It took Nova a moment to find the pillowcases, but once she did, she nearly yelped with joy. The thrift store had recently enjoyed a veritable bumper crop of pillowcases—and some of them were still in their packages. She grabbed two fistfuls and spun toward Gunner, holding them up for him to see. “We should sew a bunch of pillowcases together for a new blanket!”

Not so much as a hint of a smile.

She let her arms drop to her sides. “Come on, that was a little funny.”

“I wish we had time to sew.”

What? Did he really think she was serious? She turned and put them all back on the shelf before picking out the ones still wrapped in plastic. One of these had a sticker on it from its original store. It read seventy-nine cents. This pillowcase had been purchased during the Reagen administration.

They started the long trek to the checkout, and though they'd been reasonably successful in their mission, Nova felt defeated. This could have been a fun little adventure, but Gunner was acting depressed.

She challenged herself to make him laugh before they got out of the store. They passed by the shoe section, and she slowed, looking for fodder. She didn't have much time, and she felt pressured to be funny quickly.

And then she found it.

Right there at eye level were the ugliest boots she'd ever seen.

Shiny black plastic that would reach the top of her calves. Chunky six-inch heels. When she stepped closer, they got even better. Or *worse*, depending on how one looked at the world.

“Gunner!” she cried with all the fabricated enthusiasm she could muster.

He turned and looked at her, alarm in his eyes.

She shoved her bedding collection into her armpit so she could hold up one of the boots. “Will you please buy me these?” As the boot unfurled to its full length, she realized that the boot wasn’t a boot at all so much as a collection of straps disguised to look like a boot.

She was pretty sure she was holding up part of a stripper costume, and she tried not to feel judgmental.

Gunner’s mouth hung open. He was speechless again.

She tried to stay in character, but it was difficult. A smile was desperately trying to break out of holding. In an attempt to stave it off, she picked up the other boot and held it up as well, accidentally dropping the Reagan pillowcase as she did so. She bent to pick that up, and when she stood, Gunner had closed the gap between them.

“Do you want to try them on first?” he said, sounding nauseous.

She couldn’t do it to him any longer. She allowed the laugh to break free.

He narrowed his eyes. “That wasn’t funny.”

Now she had to fight to stop laughing. “Yes, it was.”

“Oh really?”

As she tried to return the plastic boots to the shelf, he grabbed them. “Oh, no you don’t!”

Wait, *what?*

“No, my new wife wants some glossy boots, I’m going to buy her some glossy boots. I mean, what else are you going to wear to church?”

Now she was laughing so hard now that her head hurt. “Glossy? Can boots even be glossy?”

The fact that he didn’t understand why that was funny made it even funnier. She needed to wipe her tears, but her hands were full.

“So? You want them, right?”

Her fear that he was actually going to buy them sobered her—a little. She shook her head, gasping for breath. “No, thank you.” She swallowed hard, trying to get a grip. “I’m pretty sure they’d be too small anyway.”

He scowled and then stared down at her feet as if he were doing a complicated geometry problem.

Suddenly self-conscious about the size of her feet, she said, “Come on, let’s go.” She headed toward the front before realizing she still hadn’t made him laugh.

But he’d certainly made her laugh, and maybe that was good enough for now.



Chapter 31

Gunner was relieved to see only one vehicle in his driveway: Bull's truck. Gunner had called Ryker for some muscle, but he'd only thought to do it a few minutes ago, and Ryker didn't exactly live next door.

Priscilla hadn't given them an arrival time, had only said "in a few hours," and those hours had to be winding down.

He backed his truck up to his porch and jumped out, intent on rushing into the workout of his life, but somehow, his new wife beat him into the bed of the truck. He blinked, momentarily paralyzed.

"How did you get in there so fast?" Before he'd finished the question, he realized she must have hopped over the tire. She confirmed this by pointing, but she was already moving one of the mattresses. "Can you drop the tailgate?" she asked in a tone he found rather bossy.

But Gunner didn't mind a bit of bossy. He'd always wished his mother would have been a little bossier.

He dropped the tailgate, and she pushed the mattress to him. He grabbed it and tried to hoist it over his head, but it wasn't quite stiff enough to make this manageable.

"Hang on, I'll help." She jumped down and reached up to grab the front of the mattress. He didn't like making his new wife do this, but he wasn't going to argue either.

They easily went up the steps, and Nova let go with one hand so she could open the door.

General Lee stabbed her head out of the house and blatted, and Nova let out a shriek and jumped back, smashing into Gunner, who also let go with one hand so he could grab the railing to keep from going down the steps on his keister, and then the mattress started to slip from his other hand. "Look out!" he cried to the goat, but General didn't listen. The mattress fell flat on her head, and Gunner scrambled to grab it and rescue her.

If General Lee had survived a life of turmoil only to be murdered by a new mattress, he would never be able to forgive himself.

He got a good grip on the mattress and pulled, but it wouldn't come. What on earth? He pulled harder, but something was caught somewhere. He gave a fierce tug, and when the mattress came loose, he nearly toppled back down the steps again, but he caught himself and threw the overpriced mattress aside to inspect the goat.

General was fine. All her legs had folded beneath her, and she lay there glaring up at him.

He went down on one knee to inspect her, and Nova said, "Your wife is fine, thanks for checking."

"Sorry," he said, and ran a hand down General's back.

"Gunner, look."

He looked at Nova to see her pointing at the mattress. He followed her gaze to see two holes in the middle of the fabric.

Oh. Now he knew what the mattress had gotten hung up on. He checked the base of General's horns for injury, but she looked solid. He wouldn't have yanked on the mattress so hard had he known. Stupid that he hadn't figured it out before now, but he'd been panicking. "Are you okay?" he asked General, and she slowly unfolded her legs to come to a stand. He studied her a moment longer, and then Nova said, "Is anyone going to question why the goat was in the house?"

Gunner knew, but that was the least of his worries. "Git!" He chased General down the front steps, knowing she'd come back up once he disappeared inside, but he wasn't going to let her hang out on his front steps—or in his living room. He grabbed the mattress. "Do you think child services will mind a few holes in the mattress?"

"I do not." She grabbed the other end and gingerly opened the door the rest of the way, probably waiting for other goats to squirt out.

Once Gunner had the door shut behind him, and they had started up the stairs with the mattress, he explained, "She has

figured out how to open the screen door in the kitchen. I keep telling Bull to shut both doors, but he doesn't always remember."

When they reached the top of the stairs, life got more difficult. They had to make the corner. For the first time, he appreciated that the mattress had some bend.

"How do you want to do this?" Nova stared down at it as if she were figuring out an angle for pool balls.

"I'm a fan of brawn over brain," he said and then simply shoved the mattress until it slid into the hallway. He glanced at her to see that she looked impressed, which was a little silly. He was capable of far more impressive things than brute force. "We can leave this here till we get the frame set up. He started back down the stairs.

He hadn't heard Ryker pull in, but when he stepped outside, he saw his truck before he noticed his wife Frankie on her knees in his driveway with both arms wrapped around General's neck. Good grief, no wonder the goat thought she was more special than all the other goats.

Ryker was already pulling a mattress out of the back of the truck, and then Gunner nearly cried out in agony when Ryker easily hoisted the mattress over his head. Not to be outdone, Gunner rushed to grab the third mattress. Again it tried to flop forward over his head, but this time he allowed it to happen, hurrying for the steps before his wife could help him.

It was a good thing Bull was off somewhere running the ranch. Gunner wasn't sure he could out-mattress the both of them.



Chapter 32

Nova was awash with sweat when she saw the white van pull into Gunner's driveway. The sudden geyser of tears caught her off guard. She hadn't realized she had been holding that much emotion back. She wiped her eyes and smoothed her sweaty hair back from her face. She knew she looked a fright, but it was too late to do anything about that now. They had focused on getting the house ready, and getting herself ready had been the sacrifice. They'd had to choose, and she thought they had chosen wisely.

Not even knowing for sure that her three siblings were in that van, she flung the front door open and then was dismayed to see a single goat escapee in the front yard. Oh well, at least it was only one goat and not a herd. And then she saw Gabby climb out of the van, and the tears surged again. Nova ran down the front steps as Gabby helped Mona out of the van and then Nova was there sweeping Mona up into her arms and kissing her on both cheeks. The little girl giggled and pushed Nova away, but she knew the rejection was just for show. Mona didn't like so many snuggles when there were witnesses. She wanted to be a big girl, and she was almost there.

Gabby looked up at the house and said, "We're going to live here now?" Understandably, she didn't sound so sure about that.

"Yes, we are," Nova said with more confidence than she felt. She turned to look for the van's driver, expecting to see Priscilla, but Priscilla was nowhere in sight. A different woman had escorted the children to her house. This woman wore a gray pantsuit and a tight smile. Nova opened her mouth to introduce herself, but Gunner was already shaking her hand and introducing them both. She hadn't taken him for such a diplomat but apparently when the cards were down...

"Why is there a goat?" Conley said.

Nova wished that she knew this particular goat's name so she could share it, but she didn't. She looked at Gunner, but he was still busy with Mrs. Pantsuit. "This is a ranch, and it has lots of cows and lots of goats."

Mona clapped her hands. "Really? Can we pat them?"

"You sure can, but not right now." Nova had no idea if this particular escapee was one of the friendlier goats.

He didn't even look familiar, but then Gunner was saying, "You can pet him. This is Duke." Gunner grabbed one of Duke's small horns loosely.

Nova thought he meant to pull the goat closer, but he didn't move him at all. He let the goat stay where he was and kept a loose grip on the horn, and Nova realized it was a safety precaution. She appreciated his wisdom. She didn't know Mrs. Pantsuit, but she didn't think a goat's horn to a little girl's cheekbone would leave a good first impression.

"Why don't you show Christina inside?" Gunner said to Nova.

Okay, so the woman had a name, and it was Christina.

But the tour was going to be *Nova's* job? Nerves attacked her heart, but she forced a smile. "Of course. Right this way."

Christina smiled encouragingly. "It's just a formality, and it can be brief. I've already been here when I worked with Kash's family."

Oh. That was good news, right? "Great," she said, still feeling nervous. She left the kids with the goats and headed for the house.

She went up the steps fast—apparently too fast because it took Christina a minute to catch up. But then they were in the living room, which was much cleaner than it was when Nova had first arrived at the ranch.

"It's a bit cluttered," Nova found herself defending the house right away, "but it was the family home, and there are still lots of ..." Her face burned. Why was she trying to

explain things she didn't understand? Why was she suggesting that things weren't already up to snuff?

“Artifacts?” Christina offered. She smiled gently. “We see that a lot. Nothing to worry about. And it looks great. You folks have made some changes since I was here last.” She gave Nova an encouraging smile. “It looks great. I can see the woman’s touch.”

Nova relaxed—a little. “Thanks for saying that. Let’s see the kitchen.” She led her into the next room and then felt foolish as she showed her the pantry and the fridge, but she was pretty proud of how much food they had stockpiled in such a short time.

She showed her the bathroom, self-conscious about its size, but she managed not to comment on the fact that it was the only bathroom in the house or that it would be shared by seven people.

Another reason to be glad that Rocky was gone.

Nova took the tour up the stairs and showed each of the bedrooms except for Bull’s. Christina did not blink at how barren the rooms looked, nor did she ask to see what was behind the closed door number five. “This looks great,” she said, surprising Nova.

That was it? The interrogation was over already? Noah forced a smile. “It is pretty great,” she heard herself say. They stood there awkwardly at the top of the stairs for a moment before Nova realized that she could probably go back downstairs.

She found Gunner and the kids inside and was relieved that they hadn’t brought the goat along.

Christina surprised Nova by asking if they had any questions. Nova had thought that she would be the one to ask the questions. She could see surprise on Gunner’s face as well.

Gunner shook his head slowly. “No, ma’am. I think we’re in good shape here. We’re just excited to have them home.”

A chill danced down Nova’s back at his use of the word *home*. She was surprised he was already using that word for

three kids he'd met ten minutes ago.

Christina handed Nova her business card and said, "Call me anytime if you need anything. We are here to help. We just want what's best for the kids." She smiled. "I have a feeling we are all on the same page there."



GUNNER GAVE THE KIDS an extensive tour of the ranch, going slowly so little legs could keep up. Nova trailed along behind alternating between giggling in joy and crying with relief. She tried to hide the tears from the kids because she didn't expect them to understand the emotional chaos going on inside her at the moment, but Gabby caught her a few times. All three kids took turns asking questions, and Gunner was ready with an answer for all of them even if the answer was, "I've never thought of that, and I have no idea."

After a while it was obvious to Nova that Mona was flagging and was about to say something when Gunner wordlessly scooped her up and carried her for the rest of the tour. She knew how heavy that little girl was, but apparently she was as light as air to Gunner—even after the workout he had endured on the stairs.

Then it was time for supper, and Nova was grateful that they had bought the basic ingredients for spaghetti. She was exhausted and didn't want to have to research or fake anything right now.

Despite the ease of the meal, she still felt self-conscious as she put it together, constantly stealing glances behind her to make sure no one was watching or criticizing her. But no one was. Gunner had gone back outside to do chores, and the kids were happy in the living room.

How could this all feel so peaceful already? Was the crisis really over? Not that long ago she had thought this crisis would never end—but then Gunner had swooped in with the plan of the century.

Yes, it was pretty weird that she was married now and that she was married to a practical stranger, but it didn't seem so

bad. Somehow she had landed herself a really good man. At least she was pretty sure she had. Maybe he would turn out to be a real jerk, but for now that seemed impossible.

Time would tell.



Chapter 33

Gunner had never enjoyed spaghetti more, which was saying something since the noodles were still crunchy in the middle. He was sure that Nova had been distracted while she was cooking, so he didn't say anything. He was confident the woman knew how to boil noodles.

But despite the crunch, it was delicious—probably mostly because he hadn't had to make it. And even though he would help Nova with the clean up after, it still was a great feeling that he didn't have to.

He was no longer in this alone.

He put his fork down and watched the scene swirl on around him. He couldn't stop smiling.

These kids were happy. Conley's eyelids drooped from tiredness, but still he was slurping his noodles and then laughing when the sauce sprayed onto his face. And Mona had dragged her plate over and climbed onto Nova's lap as soon as the exhausted woman had dropped into her chair.

Gabby was gabbing a mile a minute. Had Nova's mother been a prophet, or had Gabby simply grown into her name?

When Nova offered him a second helping, Gunner declined—not because the noodles were crunchy but because he could see that the pot was running low, and Conley was still eating as fast as possible, making Gunner wonder if the kid had fasted since the last time he'd seen Nova.

Gunner could sneak down for a snack later. Right now he would much rather watch Conley eat like that because if he was eating like that, it meant that he felt safe.

Bull had quietly carried his supper into the living room, and Gunner couldn't blame him. Now he could hear the television murmuring in the next room. Of course Bull would be welcome to eat with them, but Gunner could understand if he didn't want to.

Conley finished slurping and spraying, and Gabby polished off the bottom of the pot as she talked. Now they were all just waiting for little Mona to finish, but no one seemed in any rush.

Gunner felt himself continuing to relax after his very long day. He hadn't slept the night before. He would certainly sleep tonight—

Wait. Would he? They still hadn't ironed out the sleeping arrangements. He'd bought her a twin mattress, but they hadn't set it up yet, and he wasn't going to kick the woman out of his bedroom. If she wanted to sleep in there, she certainly could, but *man* did that make him nervous ...

He shook his head, trying not to think about it, trying to get back to his peaceful enjoyment of the moment. Against all odds, this old house was full of kids again, and these kids were going to have it much differently than Gunner had.

This was going to be a happy house from now on, and weren't they off to a good start.

In the middle of a long sentence about hair gel, Gabby said, "Can I go watch TV?"

"Not tonight," Nova said. "Someone else is watching it right now. "

"I'm done, boss," came Bull's voice from the other room. Seconds later he appeared in the entryway with his empty plate in hand. He hesitated and then kept his head down on the way to the sink.

Gunner made a mental note to tell him that he was still welcome in all parts of the house. And maybe he should buy the man a TV of his own for his room.

Gabby jumped up and looked at Nova expectantly.

Gunner could tell that Nova wanted to stick to her no, but he could also see her resolve weakening. "Just one show," she finally said.

"Yay!" Gabby ran into the living room with Conley trailing closely behind. Mona dropped her fork onto her plate

and buried her face in Nova's neck.

Nova patted her upper arm. "Why don't you go watch TV with Gabby for a few minutes? Let Opa clean up a little." The girl didn't stir. Was she already asleep?

"Opa?" Gunner asked. "Isn't that German for Grandpa?"

She laughed. "It's how Mona said my name when she was learning to talk, and it sort of stuck."

Gunner smiled. Opa. So his wife had the unsexiest nickname on the planet. Okay. He stood. "Why don't you and Opa both go watch TV with Gabby? I can clean up tonight."

Nova jumped up so fast that Mona started to slide down her body, but she caught her before she crashed into the tabletop. "Not so fast," she said to Gunner and then spun toward the living room.

Gunner hurried to clear as much of the table as he could before she got back, but she was faster than she looked. He turned toward the sink, and she grabbed two plates out of his hands like an aggressive pickpocket.

He started to fill the sink with hot water. "I can buy you a dishwasher if you want."

"No, that's okay."

Maybe it was, but he was going to buy her one anyway. He didn't want the first words he heard in heaven to be his mother scolding, "Why didn't you buy your wife a dishwasher?"

"I'm so exhausted that I feel like I'm drunk."

He didn't know what to say to that. He wanted to tell her that she could go straight to bed right now, but he didn't know where that was going to happen.

The hot water felt good on his hands and made him even more tired. "I'll wash, you dry."

"Fine, but I really can do the dishes by myself."

"Don't worry. I plan to let you for the next forty years. This is your honeymoon, so I thought I'd help."

She laughed. “I thought we were going to take a family vacation for a honeymoon?”

Oh yeah. He’d forgotten about that conversation. He swayed to the side so his hip bumped into hers. “Who says I can’t give my wife more than one honeymoon?” Besides, he wasn’t much of a traveler. He’d just as soon have his honeymoon in his house.

They washed and dried in silence for a few minutes, and he marveled at how he still enjoyed her company even when basically nothing was happening. He finished washing the last dish and then grabbed a second towel to help her finish drying.

When she slid the last plate into the cupboard, she said, “I’m going to go tuck the kids in.”

“Okay. Tell them we can wash their bedding tomorrow.”

She chuckled tiredly. “I promise that they won’t even notice.”



Chapter 34

Mona was so tired that she wasn't even making sense. Nova pretended to understand what she was trying to say and then kissed her on the forehead and stood to go. Mona promptly burst into tears. Feeling like she might crash and burn any second now, Nova sat on the edge of her bed again, and Mona stopped crying immediately.

Well, that was a neat trick. "What is it, honey?"

"Stay with me," she said, her words smashing together into one long one.

Nova didn't know what to do. She didn't mind staying here with her, and it was certainly a safe way out of the conundrum she had been trying not to think about for the last six hours. But it wasn't fair to Gunner, and she didn't want to use Mona as an excuse. "I have to go to my bed," she said even though she didn't quite know where that bed was.

"No!" she wailed.

That time she had heard real fear in her voice, and now she really didn't want to leave her. Mona had been through so much. Had she cried for Opa or for her mother these last few nights when neither of them could hear her? The idea broke Nova's heart. She leaned closer to Mona. "I need to go talk to Gunner, okay? Then I'll come right back."

Mona's expression froze for a second as she considered this, but when Nova stood to go, Mona screamed again and grabbed her sleeve like a tiny vice.

Nova sat, paralyzed by indecision. She didn't want to offend or annoy Gunner, but she couldn't leave Mona like this either.

Gunner appeared in the doorway. "Is she okay?"

Nova didn't know how to answer that. She stood again, and again Mona screamed and grabbed hold of her arm. She sounded like someone was trying to kill her, and her grip was so tight that it hurt Nova's skin.

“Mona, honey, I’m going to talk to Gunner. He’s right there. I won’t go out of your sight, okay?”

Mona looked past her, saw Gunner, and stopped crying. Then she looked at Nova with watery eyes and relaxed her grip. Nova backed up, keeping eye contact until she reached Gunner and then she turned to him.

His face was etched with sincere concern. “Is she scared of something in particular?”

Nova shook her head. “I don’t think so. I think she is just overtired and doesn’t want me to leave her.”

“Or maybe she’s scared that when she wakes up, you won’t be here anymore.” He sounded so sure of himself that Nova was convinced.

“I’m sorry, Gunner.” She took a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut. “I know you probably don’t have the energy for an awkward conversation tonight because I know that I sure don’t.” She opened her eyes, and she could tell he knew exactly what she was going to say. “Can we postpone figuring out sleeping arrangements for one more night? I think I should stay with Mona.”

Surprise flashed across his eyes. Oh, so maybe he hadn’t known exactly what she was going to say. “Of course,” he said quickly. Then he looked past her to Mona and smiled. “Do you two ladies need anything?”

What a sweet man. “No, thank you,” Nova said softly. Then she stood on her tiptoes and lightly kissed his lips, sending a chill swirling down to her toes. This surprised her. Not that he wasn’t chill worthy, he totally was, but she would have thought she was too tired for the chills. “Thank you for everything. I know there are some kinks in the hose, and I promise to help you work them out eventually.”

“No problem. Now that they are under our roof, there is no hurry about anything.”

Her heart warmed, not only at his sentiment, but at the fact that he’d called it *our* roof. What a generous man. “Thank

you,” she said again and wished that he could feel the heft of her words, the gravity of her gratitude.

“You’re welcome. Just yell if you need me.” He glanced down the hallway toward his bedroom. “Or you know where I’ll be.” He chuckled. Then he gently touched her hand before slipping away into the shadows.

She returned to Mona almost too tired to talk, told her to scoot over, and then slid under the covers beside her. Mona nestled into her, and she wrapped her arm around her. “I’ll be here when you wake up, honey. Every single morning from now on, okay?”

But Mona was already asleep.

And seconds later, so was Opa.



Chapter 35

Gunner wanted to comfort his wife, but she wasn't giving him any opportunity; she was too busy comforting and caring for Gabby, Conley, and Mona. All three of them were pretty upset, which was to be expected, and Nova sat with arms stretched wide—each arm a mama bird's strong and protective wing over her nestlings.

What was she trying to protect them from? The church was packed. Maybe Nova wanted to limit how many condolences the kids had to endure.

Gunner felt very much like he wasn't a part of this little family, not yet anyway, but he told himself that this was okay. Making him feel included was, and should be, far down on their priority list. Still, he knew Nova was hurting, whether she was showing it or not, and he longed to hold her in his arms and provide whatever comfort possible.

The service was well done, Gunner thought, and the pastor tried to keep the mood light. While most everyone in this sanctuary, if not everyone, was confident that Kathy Feeldy was no longer suffering but was now basking in glory, it was still heart-wrenching that a forty-something-year-old woman had been forced to leave her three kids behind. So while the service was a beautiful tribute that honored God's promises and Kathy's faith, it was still difficult to stay completely positive.

When the service was over, Gunner stayed close behind Nova as veritable hordes of people greeted her, hugged her, shared silly stories with her, and gave their condolences. She put up a good front, but he had a feeling she was more annoyed than she was letting on.

While staying acutely aware of what was happening with Nova and the kids, Gunner let his eyes wander. It was hard to believe that this was the same room where he'd said his wedding vows such a short time ago.

His life had changed so much since then. While his routine had immediately returned to what it had been before he'd found Nova on the side of the road, this routine was now seasoned with children's laughter.

And he didn't have to worry about feeding Bull anymore, which was even more of a relief than he'd expected it to be.

Bull hadn't complained, but Gunner was sure that he'd noticed that Nova was a terrible cook. Since the crunchy spaghetti, she'd served them soggy, flavorless pot roast; a stir fry featuring soot-covered carrots that defied physics by being frozen in the middle; and a meatloaf that tasted inexplicably like peppermint.

Gunner had believed that she would settle into the role and get better when she stopped being so nervous—now he was *praying* that this would be the case. If not, he was going to lose a lot of weight.

Finally, when it seemed that the steady stampede of well-wishers would never end, Nova excused herself from it, quickly but firmly explaining that Conley was hungry.

By the time the five of them reached the refreshment table, the food was pretty well picked over. It was a good thing that Conley wasn't finicky. He loaded up his plate with whatever he could find.

Nova offered Gunner a plate, but he declined. He had zero appetite right now. He just wanted to get out of here and get back to his home, his ranch, his goats, his family.

As if Gabby were reading his mind, she asked Nova if she could just go wait in Old Yeller.

Nova considered it. "I don't want you out there all alone."

"This is West Hope, Opa," Gabby sassed. "No one gets kidnapped in West Hope."

The kid had a point, but Gunner still sided with Nova, who was now looking at him, her eyes asking the question.

"I would love to go wait in the parking lot," Gunner mumbled, "but I don't want to leave you alone in here."

“I’ll be fine,” she said quickly.

“I know you will be ...” He didn’t know how to finish that sentence. He knew that Nova could handle herself. That much was obvious. But still, he didn’t want to leave her.

“Please,” Nova whispered. “I wish that I could leave. The next best thing would be to know that you and Gabby have escaped.”

“You *can* leave, you know,” he whispered back.

Her face fell. “I will, soon. I just keep thinking about what my mother would want me to do.”

He could relate. He often asked himself, *What would Mom do?* He stepped closer and then pretended to look at his watch, but he wasn’t wearing one. “If you’re not out in thirty minutes, I’m coming back in here after you.”

“Oh yeah?” Her eyes lit up with a smile that stayed off her lips. “Are you going to throw me over your shoulder like a lumberjack?”

He wasn’t sure what to say. She was obviously teasing, and this was a good thing. He wanted to keep the mood light, but he didn’t want to be insensitive either. “Maybe,” he said lamely, and then the smile appeared on her lips. She stood on her tiptoes to brush her lips against his, which made him feel extra good because it felt like it had been a long time since she’d done that.

He truly felt very patient when it came to the physical part of their marriage. He knew they had time, and his nerves helped him wait till the time was right.

But every night since their wedding night, Mona had freaked out and screamed until Nova climbed into bed with her. He couldn’t blame the kid, and he couldn’t blame Nova either. It was what it was. But still, he’d put a new bed in his bedroom and then put a purple comforter on it.

And then he’d slept in it alone.



SAFELY ENSCONCED IN the ancient van that Nova insisted she didn't need to upgrade, Gabby said, "Thank you for marrying Nova. I know why you did it."

He stopped breathing. He'd expected a story about lip gloss or hair ties—he hadn't been expecting her to go straight for his jugular.

He hazarded a look in the rearview mirror and then nearly jumped when he saw her eyes boring into his. "You're welcome, but ..." He needed to say more than simply *you're welcome*, right? "I didn't just marry her because of you kids. You were just a happy bonus."

A furrow appeared in her young brow. It looked out of place there.

"Really," he said. "I care about your sister a great deal. I wanted to marry her. She's a wonderful woman."

"But you're not in love with her."

He looked in the mirror again. Had that been a question? "No offense, Gabby, but I think I should probably tell Nova how much I love her before I tell *you* how much I love her."

Her lips spread in a wide smile, and then she pretended to zip them shut.

Yeah, right.

"It'll be our little secret," she whispered.

Oh no. What had he done?

He looked out his window to avoid any more dangerous eye contact. A few times now, he'd had the urge to tell Nova that he loved her, but he'd held back. It had felt too soon. He didn't want her to think that he didn't mean it.

And honestly, he wasn't sure that he did mean it.

Was he in love with her? He wasn't sure. He didn't know what love felt like. He didn't know what it looked like. What he was feeling almost felt too easy to be love. Too simple. Wasn't romantic love supposed to be this big dramatic thing with lots of turmoil? Because he hadn't had any of that.

Whatever he was feeling felt peaceful and warm, fun and sweet.

Yeah, it was probably love. And if it wasn't, he still didn't want it to end because it was pretty spectacular.



Chapter 36

Nova was beyond exhausted. It felt like every cell in her body was dry and burning. She needed to get some sleep, or she was going to keel over.

She staggered into the house and let Mona slide down her body. Mona was really getting too big to carry everywhere, but she'd fallen asleep in the van, and Nova didn't think today was the day to tell her she was too old to be carried. She dropped her bag on the floor and headed for the kitchen.

Gunner dragged her arm. "Are you hungry? I'll get you something?"

She was too tired to eat, but she hadn't fed Bull yet. "Bull ..." she said weakly.

Gunner pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her. He smelled good. Like laundry detergent and pine. She let herself melt into him and breathed him in. "I told him to fend for himself tonight," Gunner said softly. She could feel his breath on her hair—and inexplicably, it was this that made tears pop into her eyes for the first time in hours. He relaxed his embrace a little, and she nearly cried out. She didn't want him to let go of her—ever. He kissed her on the top of the head. "If you're hungry, I can fix you anything. It won't be fancy, but ..."

She laughed into his chest. Yeah, like that nearly disintegrated pot roast had been fancy? If she'd called it roast puree, maybe it would have gone over better. "I'm not hungry."

"Okay, then let's get these munchkins into bed so you can get some sleep."

She was too tired to voice her agreement, but she pulled away to grab for Mona, who was heading for the couch. "Come on, honey. Let's go to the bathroom, and then we'll go to bed." She stumbled through the motions of washing faces and brushing teeth, and it felt like it took forever, but eventually she was dragging them up the stairs. She didn't

know where Gunner had gone, but she trusted he hadn't gone far.

As usual, Mona cried and asked her to sleep with her, and though Nova felt guilty for neglecting Gunner, she was too tired to worry about that tonight, so she climbed into bed with Mona.

But then then Nova couldn't fall asleep. Despite her exhaustion, her brain stayed in motion. Mona's breaths quickly stretched out into soft snores, but Nova stayed awake. She heard Gunner's footsteps on the stairs and longed to be close to him. She heard him go by in the hallway and was sad that he hadn't checked in on them, but why would he? He wouldn't want to risk waking either of them up.

Feeling like a tattered version of herself, she slipped out of bed and went to his doorway. She was glad to find it open, but it was dark, and she wished she could see him. "Gunner?" she whispered into the dark.

"Yeah?" he said immediately, sounding concerned. He sat up in bed. She could see his large form, but his face was still lost in shadows.

"I'm really too tired for romance, but would you mind ...?" She didn't know how to phrase what she needed, so she just went to the other side of the bed. "Would you mind just continuing that hug for a while?"

He hesitated, but then he pulled back the covers. "Of course not. Whatever you need."

She slid into the bed beside him, and it was so warm and so inviting, and it smelled like him. He pulled her into his body and wrapped his thick arm around her back pulling her tighter still. She pressed the side of her face into his chest, and the tears came then, slow and burning. He rubbed her back and said nothing as she cried into his chest.

She had lost her mother. Her whole life had been turned upside down. Every part of her hurt. But this man—this man felt like a miracle, and she was so, so grateful that he was there, that he cared about her, that he was holding her.

And in this weird storm of grief and gratitude, Nova cried herself to sleep.



Chapter 37

Sunlight streamed in through the large windows in Denver's Albuquerque living room. Denver sat with his eyes closed, making up a story in his head as Emmylou sat in his lap watching a cartoon. When he heard footfall, he opened his eyes to see Jenna with her mouth hanging open. Emmylou slid off Denver's lap and ran to her mother, but Jenna didn't even look down.

"What happened?" Denver asked, starting to become alarmed.

"I just got off the phone with Frankie ..."

Denver slid to the edge of his chair. "What happened!"

Jenna held up a hand. "No, no," she said quickly. "Everyone's fine, but ..." It seemed she was scared to tell him whatever it was.

"Please spit it out."

The words flew out of her mouth. "Gunner got married."

Denver swung his arm back so he could clutch his arm rest for support. His forearm sent his ZIA bottle flying—he could hear it fizzing as it hit the carpet.

"Gunner got married to *who*?" Even as he said the words, he knew they couldn't be true. Gunner wouldn't get married, who would he marry, and he wouldn't marry without telling him! Before Jenna could answer, he said, "What are you talking about?" He had run straight at the edge of the frenzied cliff and then leapt off it.

Jenna stepped closer, and he could tell that she was annoyed. "How about you take a deep breath?"

He forced himself to lean back in his chair and breathe. There was no way Gunner had gotten married. He'd just talked to him a few weeks ago, and the man hadn't mentioned any woman other than General Lee. "How about you tell me what is going on before I lose my mind?"

She smiled, and her eyes sparkled. “It seems your brother had fallen madly in love with a woman from church and married her without telling anyone but Ryker.”

“Ryker?” Denver yelled. “Why does he get to know?”

Jenna laughed. “Really? That’s the part of the story that matters most?”

Realizing that she was right, he let that part ride—for now. He started scanning the church’s sanctuary in his mind, trying to find a single woman’s face. “Who is she?”

Jenna shrugged. “Her name is Nova. I don’t know her.”

“Nova? What is she, a hippie?”

Jenna smiled. “I have no idea, but wouldn’t it be delicious if Gunner married a hippie?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Honey, he runs a goat rescue. The woman would almost have to be a hippie to marry him and live there.”

Now something unpleasant started growing in Denver’s gut, something that felt like suspicion. “Did you get a last name?”

“No, but I can text Frankie if you want.” She started typing even before she finished the offer. Then she looked up. “Silvernail.”

Silvernail. That did sound vaguely familiar, but he’d been gone for so long. “So she’s local?”

Jenna shrugged. “Does that matter?”

Yes, it mattered. Denver didn’t know why, but he felt like someone from West Hope was less likely to be a predator who was after Gunner’s ranch. Then he remembered General Lee and realized the Bridge Ranch probably wouldn’t attract a lot of gold diggers. He took a breath, starting to calm down a little. “This is unreal,” he said, mostly to himself.

“Unreal,” Emmylou repeated, and Jenna laughed.

Denver was too gobsmacked to laugh. “All my brothers are married now except for me and Kash.” He looked at her. “We have to get married. I can’t be the last one.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You said we needed to plan our wedding around your filming schedule, which I was fine with. If you now rush it so you can beat Kash in some imaginary race, I will divorce you and take you for all you’re worth.”

He laughed. “Okay, fine. We won’t rush it. Wow ... Gunner ... married.” He couldn’t believe it.

“We should send them a gift.”

“We should. And we should also go visit. I want to meet her.”

Jenna nodded and looked down at her phone. He knew her well enough to know she was consulting her calendar app. She didn’t do anything without consulting her calendar app. “I can do next weekend?”

Denver nodded. “Great. Book the flights, would you?”

Emmylou looked up. “Are we going to West Hope?”

Denver laughed. “Yes, honey. Let’s go to West Hope.”

“Yay!” Emmylou cheered and clapped her hands. “Goats! Goats! Goats!”



Chapter 38

“What?” Kash cried, spinning around so fast that he nearly fell over. “What did you just say?” But then he didn’t give Bella a chance to repeat herself before saying, “That means that we need to get married, or I’ll be the last one!”

Bella narrowed her eyes. “If you propose to me just because you want to beat Denver to the altar, I will steal Polly from you and run away with a big tech billionaire. You’ll never see us again.”

He laughed. “Are there a lot of big tech billionaires hanging out in West Hope?”

Her glare was so fearsome that he was glad that her eyes were sparkling. “I know the way to California.”

“Fine, I won’t propose to you.”

Now the glare strengthened, and the sparkle stopped. “That’s not funny.”

He laughed anyway. “Well, now I can’t propose to you because if I do, you’ll think that it’s because of Denver and Gunner.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes, obviously giving up on him. He really had to up his game. He did want to marry this woman. “Anyway, why on earth did you tell me that Gunner got married?”

“I don’t know, because he did?”

“But that’s not possible. How did we not hear anything about it?”

“I guess he only told Ryker. Frankie just called me. They are on their way over there and are inviting everyone.”

“Everyone?” he said. While they were doing much better lately, the brothers still tended to argue when they all got together.

“Well, I doubt Denver is coming, but yes, they’re having some impromptu reception. She told us to bring some food.” Bella looked around his kitchen in dismay.

“We can stop at the grocery store and get some potato salad or something.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Fine. I’m going to get Polly dressed in some fun clothes.”

“But he’s married?” He didn’t understand. Who had he married? What was going on? Somebody was punking him, right?

“Kash, are you in some sort of denial? He really got married. Do you really think Frankie would lie to us?”

“But I don’t understand!” Kash cried. “Who did he marry?” He pictured Gunner marrying someone he didn’t know, some marriage of convenience so he could save a herd of goats somewhere in Peru.

Oh no. Suddenly, Kash knew exactly who Gunner had married.

“What is it?” Bella said.

“He married that woman, the sister with the kids. The one that went to school with Tucker.”

Bella scrunched up her face in deep thought. “Nova?”

Kash nodded.

“He married Nova. Gunner didn’t just get a wife. He got three kids too.” He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“Maybe,” Bella said. “Let’s not make assumptions just yet. I’m going to get Polly dressed.”

He chased after her. “We should probably bring something more than potato salad if he really got married.”

“I don’t care what you get. What goes with potato salad?” She plucked clothes from Polly’s small closet.

“No, I meant like a gift.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.” She looked at him, and he could see the wheels turning. “What on earth does someone get Gunner for a gift?”

“I have no idea. Goat grain? Maybe we should focus on what Nova would want.”

Bella nodded. “Okay, I’ll text Frankie in a little bit, though I don’t know if she knows her either. It sounds like the whole thing happened really fast ... I told you we shouldn’t have skipped church on Sunday,” she scolded. “If we hadn’t, we would probably know what was going on.”

“Fine. I’ll never skip church again.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Wait. Colton said that *Gunner* skipped church on Sunday.”

Bella shrugged. “Maybe he was on his honeymoon.”

“How can you be so carefree about this?”

She looked up at him and put one hand on her hip, all sassy like. “First of all, who are *you* to complain that someone else is carefree? And second of all, let’s get over there and find out if there’s something to freak out about before we freak out!” She looked him up and down. “Now, go get dressed. You look like you just rolled out of bed.”

Appropriately chastised, he turned to do as he was told, but his mind kept spinning. Gunner? Married?



Chapter 39

When Tucker and Wynona reached the ranch, Ryker and Frankie were already there. Little Waylon was running around with a herd of goats in the front yard. Tucker couldn't tell if he was chasing them or if they were chasing him.

When Waylon saw them, he yelled, "I gave them some grapes, and now they won't leave me alone!"

So the goats were chasing him then. "Better get some more grapes," Wynona said.

"I think they'll follow me into the house!" Waylon said.

Wouldn't be the first time, Tucker thought.

"I'll go get you some!" Wynona picked up her pace.

Tucker followed Wynona into the house and into the kitchen. She went straight to the fridge as if she owned the place. Tucker hoped Nova wouldn't mind.

Nova gave him a sheepish smile, and he smiled back, trying to be encouraging. "Hi, Nova. Nice to see you. Congratulations."

A gaggle of children exploded into the kitchen through the back door. General Lee tried to follow, but a child Tucker didn't know expertly nudged her back outside before closing the door. Tucker knew the kid must be one of Nova's siblings because he didn't know her, and he was impressed that she'd already figured out how to manage General.

Gunner finally noticed him and said, sounding a bit defensive, "This is my wife, Nova, and these are our kids." He pointed as he said, "Gabby, Conley, and Mona."

Tucker nodded. "I know Nova. Congratulations, Gunner." He was a little alarmed at Gunner calling the kids *our kids*, but Gunner sure looked happy, so Tucker tried not to worry about it.

Wynona handed Waylon a bag of grapes. “It’s lovely to meet all of you. Welcome to the family.”

Nova said thank you, but she sounded nervous. Tucker couldn’t blame her.

Frankie was moving dishes around on the counter, and Wynona went to help her, but Tucker overheard Frankie ask, “Have you convinced him yet?”

“No, but I’m thinking about doing it without him,” Wynona said.

Frankie laughed with more glee than Tucker thought Wynona’s statement deserved. He sighed. Maybe they weren’t going to stay long.

Behind him, he heard the front door open and turned to see Kash, Polly, and Bella come in. Instead of walking like a normal person, Polly twirled all the way to the kitchen. Tucker expected her to arrive dizzy and falling down, but she stopped her spinning and gracefully strode toward Frankie, her arms up for a hug, which Frankie quickly bent to give.

Kash nodded his greetings and then his eyes landed on Nova, and he looked suspicious. “Is Colton coming?” Kash asked.

“I couldn’t get a hold of him,” Frankie said, “but I left a message.”

“Did you try Adeline?” Ryker asked. “Colton doesn’t like to answer his phone.”

“I did,” Frankie said. “Does anyone know what they’re up to today?”

“I imagine that he’s working,” Kash said.

Kash and Bella sat down as Frankie asked Wynona, “Have you told Kash and Bella about your idea?”

“I did.” Wynona glanced at Tucker, probably to check his irritation levels, which were about to spike.

“We are not starting a new church,” Tucker said levelly, trying to sound as emphatic as possible.

Wynona looked at Frankie. “Like I said, I’m still working on him.”

“A new church?” Nova asked. “Why are you thinking about that?”

Though the question should have been pointed at Wynona, she was looking at Tucker, which he didn’t understand.

“We’re *not* thinking about it.”

“You’ve heard of cowboy church, right?” Wynona said to Nova.

“I haven’t, actually.”

“It’s like an outreach church, but we meet in a barn and we do stuff outdoors and we have events and it’s just like cowboy stuff but for Jesus.”

Nova laughed and looked at Gunner. “Would they let you bring your goats to church?”

Gunner shook his head firmly. “Absolutely not.”

Nova looked at Tucker. “So, what’s the problem?”

“We already have a church,” Tucker said sternly, trying not to sound like a jerk. “And there are plenty of churches in West Hope already.”

“And there are plenty of cowboys who don’t go to church,” Wynona shot back.

He was so tired of this conversation. He’d been having it for weeks. She was planning to wear him down into submission.

But Wynona was on a roll because she had a different audience today. She looked at Gunner. “What do you think? We would need a barn?”

It took Gunner a few seconds to realize what she was asking. “Absolutely not.”

Wynona laughed, as if she had been expecting that. “Why not?”

“My barn is full of goats.”

“What about the old barn?” Wynona pushed.

Tucker tried to get her attention to beg her with his eyes to stop pestering Gunner.

“You don’t do much with that barn, right?” Wynona said.

“That barn is full of cobwebs and junk. It’s not a nice barn. It’s an old barn. What about the Honeywoods’ barn?”

“I thought of that,” Wynona said, startling Tucker. She had? “But I think their barn would be *too* nice. We don’t want people to think we’re uppity.”

Tucker snickered. He couldn’t believe she was this far along in her brainstorming to worry about cowboys finding her uppity. And was there even such a thing as an uppity barn?

“Is a lack of a barn what’s stopping you?” Nova asked.

Wynona answered quickly, “Nothing is stopping us. I’m having trouble convincing Tucker, and obviously we don’t have a pastor yet. We’re just in the planning stages right now.”

Nova looked at Gunner. “I can clean out the barn. It would be good.”

Gunner gave her a soft expression that Tucker wasn’t familiar with. “Please don’t make me do this.”

Nova laughed. “Okay.” She looked at Wynona. “Give me some time, but don’t count on his barn.”

And don’t count on a cowboy church at all, Tucker thought.



Chapter 40

Colton lowered the phone from his ear and looked around the large room for his wife. She saw his expression and headed his way. “What is it?”

He wasn’t sure how to start. He didn’t want to just come right out and say something so unbelievable—the way Frankie had delivered the message to him. “I just got a really weird voicemail from Frankie.”

Adeline’s brow furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

He sucked in some air. He couldn’t believe what he was about to say. “Apparently Gunner married Nova Silvernail.”

“Nova who?”

“You know the woman in church who’s been trying to get custody of her siblings?”

Adeline’s eyes widened with understanding. “Yeah?”

“Well, apparently she has custody, and she is married to Gunner and living in our family’s house, and everyone is happy.” He genuinely didn’t know how to feel about all of this. Of course he wanted his brother to be happy, but this was so bizarre.

“He married her,” Adeline said slowly.

“That’s what Frankie said.”

“They’re married.”

Colton stared at her. “Do you need a minute to process this?”

She smiled. “I just don’t understand. Did he do it just for the kids?”

Colton shook his head. “I don’t know. That does sound like something he would do, but I don’t think he’d be that stupid.”

“It might not be stupid. Maybe she’s amazing.”

“It’s stupid to marry someone you don’t know,” Colton said.

“Well, not everybody commits to marriage twelve years in advance.”

Colton laughed and felt himself relax. This was Gunner’s life, not his. If he wanted to do something crazy, then that was his right.

“Anyway, they’re having a get together right now at the ranch. Frankie invited us to come over.”

Adeline looked around the gym, which was absolutely packed. It was packed every day now. “They could’ve given us some notice.”

“I don’t think they had much notice. I think Frankie is trying to throw a wedding reception for two people who didn’t tell anyone they were having a wedding.”

“Oh,” Adeline said slowly, finally catching up. “Well, we can’t both leave. Do you want to go over? I can stay here and keep an eye on the place.”

He didn’t really want to leave his gym or to leave his wife with that much chaos, but he really wanted to go see what was going on with Gunner. “You don’t mind?”

She shook her head. “Of course not. Just text me some updates every once in a while, okay?” She threw her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his. Then she pulled back. “I’m tempted to use this occasion to tell them about the baby, but let’s not steal Gunner’s thunder.”

Colton smiled. They hadn’t yet shared their good news with anyone. Somehow, both Adeline’s mother and Gunner had figured it out on their own, but they’d both taken vows of silence. “I thought we were going to wait till the second trimester,” Colton said.

Adeline bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. “I know that’s the smart thing to do, but I just can’t wait to tell everybody.”

Colton smiled. He was a private person, but he was pretty excited to tell his brothers as well. “I just feel bad for the other wives.”

Adeline scowled. “Why?”

“Because as soon as we announce, all of my brothers are going to want to start having babies so that I don’t get too far ahead of them.”

Adeline let go of him and stepped back. “Okay then. Let’s not tell them at all.”

Colton laughed. “I’m not sure we’re going to be able to hide an actual child.”

Adeline winked. “Maybe not, but it’s fun to have secrets with you.”

Yes, it was fun to have secrets with her too. He started toward the door. “I should probably get them a gift?”

She nodded. “You don’t have to yet. Don’t just buy them something to buy them something. Tell them that their gift is forthcoming. Better yet, ask them what they need or want.”

Colton nodded, grateful he had such a wise wife.



Chapter 41

Gunner braced himself for the interrogation. His brothers had forced him outside, and now he felt guilty for not working because he could hear Bull rattling around in the barn. At least he hoped it was Bull. It could be a goat up to no good. “I’ve got to go to the barn,” he said and started walking.

They all followed him.

“I like Nova,” Tucker said, “but Gunner, *what* were you thinking?”

He didn’t answer. But then he saw Bull and veered off so that his brothers wouldn’t annoy Bull too. He stopped and leaned on a fence.

“I thought you had to go to the barn,” Colton said.

Gunner ignored him too. He was so glad Frankie had decided to throw him a wedding reception. He wished she had let him help with the guest list.

“You guys need to calm down,” Ryker said. “He likes the girl. She likes him. Leave it alone.”

“You don’t get married because you *like* someone,” Kash said, as if he were the love expert.

“People have gotten married for far stupider reasons,” Ryker said, and Gunner shot him a look of gratitude.

“Okay, so you like her,” Kash said, “but *married*? You obviously did it for the kids, and even then, I don’t understand why you had to go so far as marriage.”

Gunner felt his jaw gape he stared at his little brother.

“What?” Kash said stupidly.

“*You* were the one who told me that she had to be married, and look! It worked! Kash to the rescue!”

Everyone fell quiet and stared at Kash. He held his hands up and looked around wildly. “I have no idea what he’s talking

about. I swear this wasn't my idea."

It was obvious that none of them believed him, and they all slowly turned to Gunner for an explanation. "Tell us what really happened, man," Tucker said.

Gunner gave Kash one last chance to defend himself, but he apparently truly had forgotten. "I knew that Kash had just been through a bunch of stuff with CPS, so I *believed him* when he said that if Nova was going to get custody of those kids, she needed to be married, employed, and have a place to live."

Kash gasped theatrically. "I never said that!"

Gunner wanted to pick him up by his belt and throw him in with the rutting bucks. "You most certainly did." He took a breath to calm himself. "But whether he remembers or not, I'm glad he said it because it worked."

Tucker and Colton exchanged a look that made him a little nervous.

"Kash is nuts, man," Colton said.

What would Colton know about it?

"This isn't 1850," Tucker said slowly. "I really don't think she needed to be married."

"Whatever," Gunner said. He didn't care. "Let's talk about something else."

"A place to live and a job makes sense," Tucker said. "Did you give her a job too? Are you paying her?"

"I'm going back inside," Gunner said and tried to push through them.

"Wait." Colton blocked his path. "We're not trying to give you a hard time. We're happy if you're happy. We're just trying to protect you."

"No, you're not," Gunner said. They had never tried to protect him from anything. "You're just being a bunch of Miss Marples." He shouldered past Colton and headed for the

house, desperate to get back to his wife and away from these nimrods.

“Who’s Miss Marple?” Kash asked behind him, but no one answered him.

“Can you just tell us if you’re paying her?” Tucker asked.

Gunner stopped and turned around, wondering what on earth a woman as smart as Wynona saw in this skinflint. “That is none of your business. None of you wanted to run this ranch, so I’m running it. Did any of you want to marry Nova?” He paused for effect. “No? Okay, then I married her. You don’t have to be happy about it. I’m happy.” He didn’t sound happy right that second, but it was true.

“You know what?” Tucker said. “I’m sorry.”

Whoa, he actually sounded it.

“You’re right. I can be too suspicious of people, but you are a good judge of character, and you wouldn’t have married her if she wasn’t a good investment.” He nodded. “I mean it, man. I’m sorry.”

Gunner wasn’t sure what to say.

“I’m sorry too,” Colton said. “It just seemed like it happened so fast, you know because you didn’t tell any of us it was happening.”

“Can you blame him?” Ryker said, and no one answered him.

“Well, then,” Kash said. “I’m so glad someone finally took my advice. I told you to marry that girl, and you did! Well done!”



Chapter 42

Nova was a little nervous to be in the house with these women she didn't know and was glad Gabby was lurking, trying to be part of the big girl conversations, but she still missed Gunner sorely.

"What do you think they're talking about out there?" Wynona said, staring out the window with her arms crossed.

"I think," Frankie said, "that Tucker is asking Gunner a string of obnoxious questions, like did he run a background check on Nova, and what's her credit score?"

Nova tried not to show her alarm, and Frankie sent her a comforting smile.

"That does sound like him," Wynona admitted, "but I think it's more likely that he's trying to get them to take a stand against my cowboy church."

Frankie laughed. "You don't need him. I'll help you with the cowboy church. Ryker thinks it's a good idea."

"That's good news!" Wynona sounded really excited, which made Nova more excited for this project she didn't quite understand.

Nova realized Bella was staring at her and stopped moving.

"Are you doing okay?" Bella said. "This must be a lot."

The other women turned to look too, and Nova felt her cheeks get hot. "I'm sort of so focused on the next step that I haven't taken time to panic about the big picture."

Bella laughed lightly. "That actually sounds very wise."

Wynona stepped away from the window. "I'm sorry, Nova. I've been so caught up in my cowboy church that I haven't really considered what this must all be like for you. But it's going okay? Gunner is treating you okay?"

Nova nodded, feeling a bit sheepish. “He’s an absolute prince.”

The women exchanged a look. “Gotta say,” Frankie said, “I hadn’t really thought about it, but knowing Gunner the little that I do, it makes sense. I mean, he’s so good with animals and kids, it makes sense that he’d be a big old romantic prince too.”

“Yeah,” Bella said. “Makes me a little jealous.”

Frankie laughed. “Oh, stop it. You’re head over heels for Kash. When are you guys getting married, anyway?”

“Well, now I have to wait for Denver to get married,” Bella said.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Wynona asked, which was exactly what Nova was thinking.

“Kash is in a race to get married, and so now I have to make sure Jenna and Denver win, so that I won’t spend the rest of my life wondering if Kash only committed to me to outdo his brothers.”

Frankie tipped her head back and laughed. “That’s awesome. You should mention it in your wedding vows.”

“Maybe I will.” Bella lifted her chin.

Frankie looked at Nova. “I know it probably seems like we’re all nuts, and maybe we are, but just know that these nuts are here for you if you need anything.”

Nova nodded. “Thank you.”

Frankie smiled down at Gabby. “That goes for you too, young lady.” She tilted her head toward the back window. “These brothers fight a lot. They don’t seem to like each other much. But they’re also fiercely defensive of each other, and anytime someone has a crisis, they all jump to help.” She smiled. “It’s a weird family, but it’s ours. And I think we’ll grow on you.”

Nova smiled. They already were growing on her.

“So tell us what we really want to know,” Bella said. “How do you feel about the goats?”

They all laughed, but then they looked at her expectantly. “Uh ... I’m not sure I would have accepted his proposal if it weren’t for the promise of unlimited goats.”

Bella laughed. “The goats helped convince me too!”

“There was a proposal?” Frankie said. “Was it super romantic?”

“Well, we were in the goat barn ...”

“Naturally,” Frankie said.

“And he said, ‘I’ve got this crazy idea.’”

“I hope you weren’t offended,” Wynona said. “Marriage is always a crazy idea.”

Nova laughed. “No, I wasn’t offended. I was excited. And then he just said, ‘What if we got married?’”

No one said anything for a moment, but then Bella said, “So simple. So clean. I like it.”

“I do too,” Frankie said. “Welcome to the family.”

Nova heard a phone buzz, and three different women started slapping their pockets.

“It’s me,” Frankie said. She pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Hey,” she said slowly. Then she glanced up at Wynona. “It’s Elizabeth Bannon. The mother of all the Bannons. The mother of the whole church, really. She says that she feels bad, that the church ladies didn’t know about the wedding, but now that she does, the church wants to throw you a proper reception.”

Nova took a step back.

Bella laughed. “Your face!” She came to her and grabbed hold of her arm. “You should do it. Don’t worry, we’ll go with you, protect you from anybody who gets too nosy.”

Nova didn’t know what to say.

“You should do it,” Wynona said. “You’ll get presents. Maybe even money.”

Frankie raised an eyebrow. “Tucker is rubbing off on you.”

Wynona ignored the barb. “What’s the problem?” she asked Nova.

“I don’t know,” Nova stammered. “I guess I’m just surprised. This sort of goes against my experience with church so far.”

Wynona frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I mean, this is the first time they’ve ever reached out to me. My mother was dying, then I was fighting for custody, and then ... I just thought I’d hear from them then, and I didn’t.”

“I’m so sorry,” Wynona said. “That’s not like them. They do a lot for a lot of people. I’m so sorry you fell through the cracks.” She straightened. “We won’t let it happen again.”

Frankie looked down at her phone. “So can I tell them yes?” She sounded excited. This was a woman who loved her parties. “You won’t have to do anything.”

Still unsure, Nova felt herself nodding. “Sure. I guess.”

It really was a whole new world.



Chapter 43

Gunner stood at the living room window watching Ryker back out of his driveway. Frankie, Waylon, and he were the last guests to leave, and though Gunner had enjoyed the unplanned get together, he felt some relief to have his house back. He turned to head back toward the kitchen. “So, what did you think of my family? Are you doing okay?”

Nova laughed. “I think they’re pretty spectacular, and I think that they love you a lot.”

Gunner kissed her on the forehead. “You did great. I think they love you too.”

She laughed. “Cool idea about the cowboy church.”

Oh no. “Don’t even start. I really don’t want strangers in my barn.”

She laughed. “I wasn’t going to ask you about the barn. I just think the church is a good idea. They can do it in someone else’s barn.”

He wasn’t so sure. “Nothing against Wynona. I think her intentions are good, but we already have a church. If she starts pulling people away from it, Ma Bannon is going to lose her mind.”

“Hey, speaking of her. She and some other ladies from church want to throw us a wedding reception.”

Yikes. “Do I have to go?”

She laughed. “Yes, you have to go.” She glanced at the counter, which was covered in casserole dishes. “I ate too much, but there’s still plenty of food left. Do you think we could just have everybody eat the leftovers instead of making supper tonight?”

Gunner nodded. “Of course. That’s a good idea.”

“Good because I kind of wanted to go frolic with the goats for a while.”

Gunner laughed. “Frolic?”

“Yes, I’ve been so busy that I’ve been neglecting them.”

“So that’s what all the screaming has been about.”

She laughed. “Would you like to go frolic with me?”

Gunner had a thousand things he needed to do, but he said, “Sure,” and followed his wife out through the back door. She made a beeline for the smaller pasture where he kept the babies. He wasn’t surprised. As soon as she stepped into the pasture, they all ran for her, swirling around her legs and letting out their little baby bleats. It was adorable.

“Kash asked me when we were going to start doing goat yoga.”

Gunner made a mental note to punch Kash in the throat. “That’s an easy answer.”

She looked up at him, her eyes questioning.

“The answer is never.”

Her face fell.

“What, you really want to do goat yoga?”

She plopped down on the ground and two different kids climbed into her lap as the rest tried to follow their lead. “I do. I think it would be so fun, and it would bring in some extra money. But I won’t if you don’t want to.”

“Let me ask Tucker to look into insurance, and if it’s possible, I don’t care. Just make sure it happens when I’m on the opposite side of the property.”

She laughed. “Deal.” She picked up one of the babies and held her cheek to his. “I need to go to the grocery store,” she said without looking at him.

“Right now?”

“No, but before tomorrow’s supper. I feel bad asking you for money, but I haven’t launched my goat yoga business yet, and my boss doesn’t pay me much.”

Gunner laughed and pulled out his wallet. “I forgot to tell you ...”

“You don’t need to hand me cash right now,” she said, sounding like she felt bad.

“No, I’m not.” He stepped into the pasture and held his hand out to her, a shiny new debit card sticking out between two fingers. “I forgot to tell you that I added you to the bank account, so you don’t have to ask me for money anymore. I keep the checkbook on that cluttered table I call a desk, if you ever need to see how much money we have in there.”

She looked surprised, which hurt him a little. She slowly took the card from his hands.

“What, did you think that you weren’t going to have any access to the family finances?”

She looked down at the card. “I hadn’t thought much about it, but yes, I guess that’s how I would’ve thought this would go.”

Gunner shook his head, wishing that he had talked to her about this sooner. “No way. You’re not a servant. You’re my wife. We’re partners in this now. But if you decide to clean me out, just don’t take more than what’s in there because I really hate overdraft fees.”

She looked up at him from her spot on the ground, and he winked at her. Yep, with each passing moment it was clearer. This was love. He was the luckiest man on earth. He had tried to do a good thing, but he had ended up marrying the woman he loved.



Chapter 44

Days ago Gunner had mentioned that he enjoyed barbecue; since then Nova had been trying to figure out how to make that happen. She had no idea how to barbecue anything though and she thought it had to be quite a production. She pictured a giant hog on a giant stick over a giant fire and thought that Gunner would have to go the rest of his life without barbecue.

But then, as God would have it, she saw a prepackaged version of Jack Daniel's barbecue pulled pork in the grocery store. She snatched it off the shelf so fast that two little old ladies turned to stare at her, wondering what was wrong. She waited until they looked away, which took a while, before grabbing two more packages. The packages looked so small and both Bull and Conley ate more than any reasonable person should. But once she had the packages in her cart she stood there staring at them. Now she had barbecue meat. What was she going to do that? She could serve it in a pile beside some store-bought potato salad or she could buy some buns, but that felt so basic. It was bad enough that she was buying premade barbecue; she had to do something more exciting than slap it on a premade bun.

Gunner was being very generous with her grocery budget, but she didn't want to take advantage. She whipped out her phone and leaned on her cart to type "what to do with pulled pork" into the search bar, but all that popped up were fancy sandwiches. There was one picture of pulled pork mixed with mac and cheese, and that made her stomach rumble with hunger and excitement, but she wanted something a little healthier for the kids, so she kept scrolling.

And then something nearly took her breath away. Barbecue pork and penne skillet.

She eagerly scrolled through the ingredients list as this usually disqualified recipes from an attempt. So often, online recipes included ingredients she had never heard of or that she couldn't find in their small local grocery store. She had

already embarrassed herself asking a clerk where they kept the red palm oil and miso paste, but this list looked like it was actually written in English. It contained her pork, some simple pasta, and some vegetables. This was almost too good to be true. She nearly ran around the store adding the ingredients to her cart, so excited to try something Gunner might not have to drink a quart of water to wash down.



WHEN GUNNER SAW NOVA chopping onions, his face fell. “Are you okay?”

Only then did she realize there were tears streaming down her face. She wiped some of them away with the back of her hand. “Absolutely.” She pointed her knife at the onion on the cutting board.

“Oh, of course. Sorry, I didn’t notice that’s what you were doing.” Not only had he not noticed, but he was obviously surprised. He kissed her on the cheek. “Something smells good.”

The only thing that could possibly smell good, unless he could smell the barbecue through the plastic, were the red peppers sizzling in the pan. She had put them in before she’d realized that she still needed to cut the onion, so now she was hurrying to catch up or she was going to have burnt peppers and raw onions.

The peppers did look a little extra done, but by the time she had all of the vegetables sautéed, they looked far better than most things she had cooked.

She had to use two different skillets to make enough for everyone, and she thought it funny how dramatic that looked on the stove, as if she was really a ranch cook with a dozen hands to feed. Conley certainly ate like a hand, so she hoped that he would prove to be helpful to Gunner as he got bigger and stronger. He certainly had the interest. He followed Gunner around like a shadow, wanting to do everything. Of course, this might slow down when the snow started to fly, but she hoped it wouldn’t slow down much.

She sent Gabby to tell everyone that supper was ready, and the girl took off. This was her favorite chore so far. She liked bossing people around.

Nova was so excited that she was nervous. She didn't know if this was going to be delicious, but she knew that it wasn't burned or raw, so she was going to take it as a win.

People spilled into her kitchen from both directions, and Conley rushed for the stove. She gently slapped his reaching hand. "We wait for Bull," she said.

As if summoned, their sole wrangler wandered through the back door, and she made his plate up first. Despite repeated invitations to join them in the kitchen, he liked to eat in the living room in front of the TV. She couldn't blame him.

Then she started serving her little family. She usually served Gunner first, but she didn't tonight because she wanted to be able to see his reaction when he tasted the food.

She set his plate in front of him just before she sat across from him at the table, and then she tried to play it cool as she kept one eye on him.

He thanked her for making supper as he always did, and then he studied his plate for a moment. She couldn't read his expression. Was he afraid? If so, she had given him cause, so she couldn't be upset. Then, without looking for her, he put a few noodles on his fork and into his mouth. He chewed for a few seconds and then looked up at her in surprise before swallowing. She fought to keep the smile off her face. He went for another forkful, this time getting some meat.

She felt a little guilty, as she hadn't really made this from scratch. "It's packaged barbecue pulled pork," she admitted. "I have no idea how to barbecue something outside."

He laughed and kept chewing. He took a break before bites to quickly say, "If you make this, I'll barbecue you anything you want outside." He shoved another forkful in, and Nova didn't know if she had ever been so excited.

Then he swallowed and looked at her to say, "Except chevon of course."

“What’s chevon?” Gabby asked, looking concerned.

“Something we don’t talk about here,” Gunner said quickly. Then he ate some more.

Nova mouthed, “I’ll tell you later” to Gabby. Then she finally allowed herself to start eating.

She too was surprised at how good it was. Maybe she could make this every other night while she figured out something else she could manage.

Gunner looked up at her when his plate was almost clear and said, “This is really delicious!”

She almost laughed at how surprised he was.

“It sure is,” Bull said from behind her. “Is there more?”

She waved at the stove. “Help yourself. I made lots.”

“Thank you.” Gunner got up to get himself a second helping, and Conley looked at her with a question in his eyes.

She nodded. “Go ahead.” She watched the men reload their plates and thought that if this is what cooking was supposed to feel like, then maybe she didn’t hate cooking after all.



Chapter 45

At the end of Gunner's fourth grade year, his teacher had given him the most improved award. His mother had been thrilled, but Gunner had been embarrassed. Saying that a nine-year-old was most improved said that the nine-year-old started off the year as stupid. It was a backhanded compliment and not one not worth giving. So while he was nearly desperate to make sure that Nova knew how much he had enjoyed supper, he didn't want to make too big of a deal of it, lest he draw attention to how terrible her first several suppers had been.

He didn't want to give his wife the most-improved cook award.

Gabby had already gone to bed, and now Conley was asking if he could go upstairs as well. They had been watching a movie together, and it was quite boring, so he could see why the kids wanted to escape. Nova, however, seemed to really be enjoying the flick, and he was enjoying having his arm around his wife while she enjoyed something, so it didn't really matter to him how boring it was. Nova told Conley that he could go to bed once he washed his face and brushed his teeth, and he hung his head on the way to the bathroom.

Gunner heard the water turn on and then immediately turn back off; seconds later the door opened. He knew the kid had just faked his nightly hygiene routine, but Nova was too engrossed in the movie to catch it. "Good night, sweetheart," she said as he went up the stairs. Gunner caught his eye and winked, and Conley gave him a shy smile.

Mona was already asleep on Nova's lap.

Gunner tried to hide his yawn, but Nova looked at him. "You don't have to finish this, you know."

He nodded. "No, no, I'm enjoying it," he lied.

She gave him a sideways smile that suggested she knew he was fibbing, but she didn't argue.

When the credits started, Gunner was relieved, and started to get up, but Nova put a hand on his knee. “Hang on, there’s a bonus scene after the credits.”

He settled back in. Of course there was. He watched the credits scroll across the screen. “Your supper was really delicious tonight,” he said before he realized he was going to say it. Apparently he just couldn’t contain his praise any longer.

She smiled. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

“We could make that a weekly thing if you don’t mind making it.”

“Already planned on it,” she said.

The bonus scene started, and it was all about a woman catching her husband in a lie. Gunner started to feel guilty for lying about liking the movie. He waited till the scene finished before saying, “Okay, I apologize, but I really didn’t like that movie.”

He expected Nova to laugh, but she didn’t. She stared at him as if she were horrified.

“I’m sorry. Was it really important to you that I liked it?”

She shook her head. “No, I had a feeling you didn’t like it, but I just ...”

“What is it?” Something serious was afoot.

“I think it’s important that we don’t lie to each other.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “It wasn’t a real lie. I just wanted to keep watching the movie with you, and I didn’t want you to feel bad that I didn’t like—”

“No, no,” she said, “not that.” She looked down at Nova’s head in her lap. “I feel like I’ve already been caught in a lie, but you are too nice to say it.”

What was she talking about?

“You’ve probably figured out by now that I don’t know how to cook.” She looked up quickly. “I thought that I would be able to figure it out before I had to cook something. You

know, like make the lie true before you realized it was a lie. But obviously, that's not the way things turned out. I'm sorry. I didn't want to lie. I just really wanted to marry you, and you seemed so happy to think I could cook."

His chest grew warm at her words. She hadn't said that she wanted him to marry her or that she wanted to save the kids. She had said that she wanted to marry him. He was so in love with this woman. Maybe it was time he told her. "I love you," he blurted out.

She let out a bewildered giggle. "What? I admit my big scam to you, and you profess your love for the first time?"

He laid his hand gently at the base of her neck. "I should have told you sooner, but I didn't want to tell you too fast because I didn't think you'd believe me." He laughed awkwardly. "And I really didn't mean to tell you right now. It just came out because I didn't want you to feel bad about the cooking thing."

"Really?" Her eyes sparkled, reflecting the TV's blue light.

He nodded. "Really. And please don't feel pressured to say anything in return. What we have here is fantastic whether you ever fall in love with me or not. I mean, I hope that you can grow to love me, but I don't want you to lie and tell me that —"

She silenced him with her lips pressed to his, and his hand found the back of her head, his fingers sliding into her soft hair as she kept leaning into him. He couldn't help but chuckle as they kissed. "You're not supposed to laugh when a woman throws herself at you," Nova said in this sultry whisper.

Is that what was happening? "Sorry," he tried to mumble, but he wasn't sure she heard him as she was curling one leg under her so she could push herself closer to him.

He glanced down at Mona and then pulled away. "Do you want me to carry her upstairs?"

Nova nodded quickly. Gunner stood, his legs feeling a little weak, and slid both arms under the little girl. Cradling her head on his bicep, he easily carried her up the stairs and

laid her in bed, praying that she would stay asleep. He did not know what was happening with his wife, but whatever it was, he didn't want it to be interrupted.

When he stepped out of Mona's room and back into the hallway, he ran right into Nova, who kissed him again. Now he picked her up, and was mighty pleased with himself at the way she gasped when he did so. He kept kissing her as he carried her down the hallway toward his bedroom. But he paused the kiss when he reached the doorway. "Shall I carry you across the threshold, wife?"

She nodded. "If I had known that you loved barbecue this much, I would have figured it out long ago."



Chapter 46

When Nova woke up, Gunner was already out of the bed, making her feel like a lazy slacker. The sun was already up, so she knew she was behind schedule. She listened for the sound of kids' feet as she slipped out of bed, knowing that she would feel worse if she had slept in while he dealt with the children, but she didn't hear anything.

When she reached the doorway, she stood there for a moment collecting herself. Last night had been incredible. So overwhelmingly incredible that she wasn't sure how to feel about it. She hadn't been planning for things to go that way, but they just had. It had felt so right, so real, and so necessary. Though she hadn't said it yet, she was in love with this man and last night she had wanted to make him feel that love in every way possible whether it was pulled pork or making love. But now she felt a bit dizzy from it all, a bit bashful, a bit vulnerable. She was a confident woman. She couldn't believe that she was afraid to go downstairs and face her husband. That didn't match who she was. But then, as she tried to steel herself, tried to psych herself up for the big journey down the stairs, she heard Gabby's voice below her. That broke the spell. She hurried down the stairs to rescue Gunner from some lecture on fingernail polish.

She found her whole family in the kitchen, and was surprised to see them all there together acting so peaceful. Gunner was at the stove, and she smelled sausage. His face lit up when he saw her, and he strode across the small room and gave her a kiss. It was sweet and longer than she expected, and might have gone on even longer if Conley hadn't said, "Ewww."

Gunner pulled away still smiling, and Nova's eyes fell to see General Lee watching her through the screen door. "General's trying to get back in again," she said, grateful for the distraction.

Gunner chuckled. "Yes, she has already succeeded once, but Mona is keeping an eye on her for me."

Nova's eyes found Mona, and sure enough, the little girl was staring at the back door like she had a real job to do.

"I'm going to make a quick trip to the little girl's room." Nova scurried off, still feeling abnormally shy. She washed up and then primped a little in the mirror, something else she wasn't used to.

When she got back to the kitchen, Gunner was putting plates on the table. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her into him for another kiss. "Would you like some coffee?" he said in an oddly gravelly voice.

She nodded, breathless. He pulled her chair out for her and waited for her to sit before going to the coffee pot. A plate piled high with food sat in front of her. Conley was already eating.

"You didn't have to do all this," Nova said.

"I know, but we have so many eggs piled up that I wanted to use some up."

Nova slid her fork into the pile of American fries, knowing that he had used the potatoes she'd bought for the pot roast. That wasn't a big deal, though, since she was so bad at making pot roast. The potatoes were probably grateful that he'd rescued them.

She ate slowly, enjoying every bite, and using the food to distract her from the fact that she could feel his eyes on her. She had never felt quite so admired, and it felt good.

One by one, the kids finished and asked to be excused. She told them to take care of their plates and then they could go. Little Mona could barely reach the sink, but she managed to slide her plate onto the counter.

When they were gone, Gunner reached across the table and took her hand. "Thank you."

Now her cheeks burned. She didn't know what to say to that. Was she supposed to say he was welcome? Was she supposed to thank him as well?

“I mean it. I have never felt wanted in this world, not once in my entire life, but you make me feel that way. You make me feel necessary, and I’m so grateful for that.”

Her eyes couldn’t help but rise to meet his, and then she swallowed hard. The love in his eyes took her breath away. This man really loved her.

He smiled and let go of her hand. “Besides, it was also very fun.”

She giggled. Yes, it had been fun, hadn’t it? They should probably try it again soon.



Chapter 47

Life had settled into a routine, and Gunner felt bad about it. They had enrolled the kids in school, and the ranch was as busy as ever. Nova kept the house functioning, kept the kids going, and kept supper on the table. She had also created a thriving goat yoga business.

Sometimes her suppers were still hard to choke down, but for the most part, she had turned into a decent cook. And once a week, they had that pork and pasta dish, and every time they had it, he and Nova would exchange a coy look that meant they were both excited to get upstairs.

But Gunner worried that this new life, as much as he was enjoying it, was too basic. This woman had led a really exciting life before him. She had followed rock bands around the country, and now she was in this routine of work, work, work, roll around on the ground with goats, sleep, and then work some more.

And when the snow flew a little too early in the fall, Gunner panicked that when they got dumped on, she was going to realize that she had made a terrible mistake.

He caught her looking out the window at the goats in the backyard and went to stand beside her. “You probably haven’t spent many winters in South Dakota lately, have you?”

She smiled sweetly. “I spent the last one here, and it was terrible.” She looped her arm through his. “But I have lots of reasons to believe this one will be better.”

This was good news, and he hoped she wasn’t just saying it for his sake. “I’m sorry life has been so busy lately.”

She looked at him and looked surprised. “Don’t be sorry. I like it busy. Besides ...” She looked out the window again. “I’m not sure how we could keep it unbusy with three kids running around.” She looked at him. “Are the kids getting on your nerves?”

“No, no, not at all,” he said quickly. Quite the opposite actually. He couldn’t believe how fond he had grown of each kid. And not just because they were kids, but he was getting to know each of them as individuals, and they were each really cool people. They were smart, and funny, and just pure-hearted. He appreciated each of them for who they were and who they were growing up to be.

“I just wish that I could put some more romance in your life,” he said, not even really knowing what he meant by that.

She looked at him with wide eyes. “Are you kidding? You’re the most romantic man I’ve ever known.”

That said more about the men she had known that it did about him, he thought. “You know, we have never actually been on a real date.” He felt even more pathetic once he had said it out loud. “We are married, we have a family, we run this ranch like a fine-tuned machine, but I have never taken you out on a date.” He paused to look into her eyes, trying to read her mind. “How about I take you out to a fancy dinner somewhere? We can get all dressed up and go somewhere where they like play violins while you eat oysters or something.”

She tipped her head back and laughed, and she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. When she had recovered from her laugh, she leaned her head on his shoulder and looked out the window again. “We can do that if you want, but I really don’t think you want to.”

He did not argue with that.

“We can have a date, we can do whatever you want, but do you want to know what my ideal date is?”

Yes, he did, desperately, and he said so.

“My perfect date would be that the kids would not squabble, and that I would not mess up supper, and that I would cook something delicious with good music playing in the kitchen, and that you and the kids would help me eat it and would enjoy it and would tell me how good it was, and it would also be healthy without the kids knowing it. Then you

might help me clean up, and then we go relax on the couch and watch TV together and snuggle. Then we go upstairs and spend some time getting to know each other a little better before falling into a nice, deep, quiet sleep.” She looked at him as if asking for his approval.

“Are you serious?” No way was she serious.

She nodded, and her eyes sure looked sincere. “I am serious. This is not the life that I would have picked out for myself, but obviously God knew more about what I wanted than I did.” She kissed him lightly on the lips. “Gunner, my life is perfect. I love you so much—” She gasped and put her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. “Oh my gosh, I didn’t mean to say that.”

He wasn’t upset that she’d said it. He was a little startled, and he was even more startled that she seemed sorry she had said it. He stood there dumbfounded, waiting for her to explain herself.

She laughed uncomfortably. “I’ve been waiting for a poetic time to say it. Like, I wanted it to be more meaningful because it happened at a certain time. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to blurt it out like that.”

He was just so encouraged to hear it. He knew that she liked him, obviously, and cared about him, but it was good to hear her use the word *love*. Love lasted a lot longer than those other things. He kissed her on the temple and then looked out the window at the light snow falling on his rescue goats. “I can think of no more romantic time and place to hear those words than right now.”

“Well, that’s good, because I sure do love you, Gunner Bridge.”

His heart swelled, feeling so full he thought it might burst. “I sure do love you too, Nova Bridge.”



Epilogue

Nova knew that pride was the precursor for all sorts of downfalls, but she still couldn't help but feel some when she surveyed the scene in front of her.

They were in a barn in the middle of nowhere. Years ago, a ranch had been divided up, and this one parcel hadn't sold—probably because it had this one weird barn stuck in the middle of it.

The cowboy church gang had a budget of exactly zero, so they couldn't buy the parcel, and no one was keen on financing it, so they had approached the owner about renting the barn, and she had told them they could use it at no cost as long as they were doing it for Jesus.

They'd already held a few cowboy church services there, and now it was the site of a super-secret sneaky wedding.

Only Jenna's family, Denver's family, and a chunk of *Cheyenne* cast and crew had been invited.

The barn wasn't crowded, but it still felt full of life. Denver and Jenna were absolutely adorable. Nova hardly knew them, but still she was enjoying their joy. And though she'd never been much of a *Cheyenne* fan, it was also fun to know that she was hanging around with showbiz royalty. Despite their fame and probably fortune, they seemed like friendly, down-to-earth people who were only there to support their friends. Of course, if there were jerks on the *Cheyenne* set, Denver had probably known enough not to invite them.

Gunner appeared beside her and put his arm around her. "Pretty proud of yourself, aren't ya?"

She laughed. He knew her so well. "Maybe a little," she admitted.

He gave her some side eye. He still wasn't excited about the cowboy church. Despite the fact that it was bringing people to "church" who never went to church, Gunner still felt guilty for hypothetically pulling people away from his home

church. They'd had a few squabbles about it, but in the end, they'd decided it wasn't worth contention between them.

"Wynona sure is happy," Gunner remarked.

"She should be."

"You both should be. You two ganged up on us and overpowered all the Bridge Brothers combined."

She laughed. That was an exaggeration. "Frankie helped us too."

"Fine. I'll blame her too."

Two guitars started playing, and Nova jumped. "We have to find our seats!" She grabbed Gunner's hand and gently pulled him down the aisle to where the kids were sitting. She and Gunner squeezed in between them and Kash, Bella, and Polly. Polly gave her a bright, toothy smile.

In front of them sat Tucker and Wynona and beside them sat Colton and Adeline, whose baby bump was starting to show. And all the way in the back sat Ryker, Frankie, and Waylon. Though Ryker had been more involved in the cowboy church than anyone had expected, he still wasn't much for sitting up front.

"Did you see her dress yet?" Gabby asked.

"I haven't," Nova said, "but I've heard that it's spectacular."

Emmylou started down the aisle carrying a basket of flowers that she happily tossed side to side. Halfway down the aisle, she reached into the basket and came out with no flowers. She looked closer, must have seen that the basket was empty, and then looked up, eyes wide with panic.

Denver smiled at her and beckoned, and she took off for him at a dead sprint.

"Kid's got wheels," Colton said.

Denver caught her and kept her from crashing into anything. Then they both looked toward the back, where Jenna's childhood friend Liza was starting down the aisle. She

was the only bridesmaid. Jenna and Denver had vowed to keep the ceremony small, and they had kept their word.

Gabby gasped, and her small hand flew to cover her mouth.

Nova could see why. The woman looked gorgeous in her silky mint-colored dress.

Then Jenna appeared, and Gabby gasped again, this time so dramatically that Nova feared she would pass out.

Jenna's dress was exquisite, and Nova was thrilled for her. She brought herself down the aisle, having made the decision not to invite her father at all. Nova didn't know the details, but she'd overheard Tucker say that her father would turn a secret wedding into a photo op with reporters from four states.

Gunner snaked a strong arm around her waist and whispered into her ear. "Are you regretting that we didn't do all this?"

She shook her head and leaned back into him before turning her head to whisper, "I have no regrets at all, my love."

He kissed her on the top of her head. "That's good to hear, my love. I don't either."