



Christmas in the Montana Pines

A MONTANA PINES NOVELLA

**JILL
HAYMAKER**

**Christmas
in the
Montana
Pines**

Montana Pines Series, Book 4

Jill Haymaker

Print Edition

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Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

This book is dedicated to the love we find at Christmas. May it last throughout the year.

Chapter One



“Mom! What the heck do you think you’re doing?”

Belle Brooks looked down toward the bottom of the ladder and frowned at her son, Ryder. “What does it look like? I’m putting up the Christmas lights.” She held up the strand of multi-colored lights in emphasis.

“Come down here right now.”

Belle remembered saying that very thing to Ryder when he was four years old and trying to scale a mountain of hay bales on their Montana horse ranch. When did he become the parent? She sighed. Next thing she knew he’d be climbing the ladder and dragging her down, so she laid the rest of the strand on the edge of the roof and descended to where he stood.

Ryder frowned at her. “Why would you even think of climbing up this ladder?”

Belle frowned back at him. “Because tomorrow is December first. We always turn our lights on December first. They weren’t going to hang themselves.”

“I told you that I’d take care of it.”

“I know, but you’re busy with the horses, so I took it into my own hands. Why not? Do you think I don’t know how to climb a ladder?”

“Mom, you’re sixty. Your bones aren’t as strong as they used to be.”

“My bones are fine.”

“Really, is that why you broke your foot walking to the barn two years ago? What if a strong gust of wind had come along and blown the ladder over? I’ll put up the lights.”

“When?”

“This weekend.”

Belle frowned. “But they won’t be up by the first.”

“So what? They’ll be up by the fifth. It’s not like anyone can see them from the road. No one in the family will care if they are a few days late. You can leave them up longer in January to make up for it.”

Belle sighed. He had a point. Their ranch was nestled in a valley in Montana’s Pine Mountains. No one could see them unless they drove up their half-mile lane. Still, it was tradition. Ryder’s father, Gordon Brooks, had always put them up on time, as had her second husband, Larry, but she’d outlived them both. She thanked God every day that her son had come home to help her run the ranch. And now that he had a wife and two beautiful children, her life was complete. She should cut him some slack. He did so much for her. “I suppose you’re right.” She paused. “But I would have been fine.”

“Promise me no more ladders, okay?”

“Okay, I promise.” She was lucky to have a child who cared for her. Some folks her age didn’t. He made it possible for her to stay on the ranch she loved. The ranch she’d come to as a young bride and never left. If she had it her way, she’d eventually die here. But that wasn’t happening for a good long time. Her Aunt Grace had lived to one hundred, and she intended to follow that tradition.

Ryder grabbed the ladder and laid it on the ground. “Why don’t you go back inside? I’m going to put this ladder away.” He glanced off to the west. “It looks like a winter storm is blowing in.”

Belle watched Ryder walk toward the barn. He was probably going to lock the ladder somewhere she couldn’t find it. She’d be angry if he wasn’t such a fine young man. He’d left the ranch for ten years after high school because he didn’t get along with Larry. He’d thought she remarried too soon after his father’s death, but she’d been lonely, and Larry had been there for her. She didn’t regret it. But when Larry passed, and she broke her foot, Ryder had come home to stay. Shortly after that, he’d met Haley and her young son, Noah. They’d been such a blessing to Ryder and to her. He’d married Haley and adopted Noah. Then four months ago, their lives were even more blessed with the birth of Cassidy. She was perfect in every way, and Belle was thankful to live in the same household to watch her grow up.

Belle walked inside the large, log ranch house. They’d already put up the tree, and six-year-old Noah had a blast hanging decorations on every limb. It made her smile every time she looked at it. Now what? Since she’d

been banished to the house, she'd drag out the rest of the boxes of decorations and put them up. There were the stockings for the hearth and the Christmas village she always put in the bay window in the living room. Maybe she could get it set up by the time Noah got home from school.

Haley joined her in the living room. "Do you want some help? Cassidy went down for a nap, so I have a few minutes."

"If you want to help, that would be great."

"I'd love it. Show me where everything goes."

Her son couldn't have picked a better wife. She loved her like her own daughter, Annie, who lived down in Pine Meadows with her husband and Belle's two other adorable grandsons. Her life was full, and it was going to be a wonderful Christmas, even though she sometimes missed having a warm body to snuggle up against on cold winter nights. She'd accepted it. She was too old to look for love, and even if she'd wanted to, she'd already buried two husbands. That was enough. She didn't need to outlive a third. Nope, her kids and grandkids were enough.



Belle glanced out the kitchen window as she finished the breakfast dishes. A loose shutter rattled against the house in the wind. She needed to remind Ryder or their ranch hand, Landon, to tighten it down. The snow was coming down good already and was supposed to get worse as the day went on.

Haley walked into the kitchen, a smiling baby in her arms. "Mom, would you mind watching Cassidy for a couple of hours this morning? I've got some errands to run, so I thought I'd drop Noah off at school and stay in town in case they cancel school early. In this weather, I think they might."

"Mind? I'd love to watch this adorable little one." Belle suspected that Haley didn't like the idea of Noah riding the bus in this weather. She understood that. Noah meant everything to her.

"Thanks. Ryder and Landon had to drive over near Butte to pick up a horse. She'll go down for a morning nap in about an hour. She might sleep until I get back. There are several bottles in the fridge."

"We'll be fine."

Haley joined her in looking out the window as the shutter rattled again. "I hope Ryder is alright on the roads."

"Don't worry about him. He grew up on these mountain roads. Plus, that truck and trailer of his is so heavy, it can plow through almost anything. He'll be fine."

"Is there anything you need in town?"

"I don't think so. I'm going to start some Christmas cookie dough and let it chill so Noah can help me bake when he gets home."

"Oh, he'll love that. Just call my cell if you think of anything you need."

"Will do."

Once Haley and Noah left, Belle had spent an enjoyable hour playing with Cassidy. Then, she'd put her down for her nap and whipped up a big batch of cookie dough. After putting it in the fridge, she poured herself a large mug of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table.

What was that noise? She looked outside through the big, fat flakes of snow. A vehicle was coming down the lane. They didn't get much company, especially in a snowstorm. Was Haley back already or had Ryder turned around? As the vehicle neared, she saw it wasn't either one of them. Instead, an old, beat-up pickup came into focus. It looked like it had once been red but was now a faded pinkish-orange. She didn't know anyone with a truck like that. Was someone lost? She slipped on her boots and down jacket and stepped out onto the porch as the truck stopped a few feet away.

A tall, lean cowboy stepped out. He tipped his black, felt Stetson. "Howdy, ma'am."

His long, white hair curled around his neck, and his jacket looked as worn as his truck.

"Can I help you?" she yelled into the wind to be heard, as she braced herself against a strong gust.

"I'm looking for the Pine Mountain Ranch."

"Well, you've found it."

He took a few steps closer to the porch. Should she be afraid? She was here alone with a baby.

"I'm looking for work. Someone in town suggested you might be hiring."

"You'd have to talk to my son. He's not here right now." *That was*

stupid. Tell this stranger that she was home alone.

The man walked right up to the porch. He visibly shivered. “Quite the storm we have blowing in.” He reached up to grab his hat to prevent it from blowing away.

Belle hesitated. The smart thing to do would be to ask him to leave, but he looked cold, and the weather was awful. He didn’t look like a mass murderer—not that she was sure what one looked like. As he neared, his eyes were kind. She’d always prided herself on her hospitality. “Would you like a hot cup of coffee?”

“I’d be much obliged, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all. I just made a fresh pot. Come on in.” And just like that, she’d invited a stranger into her home.

He followed her in the front door and closed it behind him. “Nice place.”

“Thanks.” She watched as he slipped out of his snow-covered boots. His socks underneath had holes and both big toes stuck through. He also removed his snow-covered jacket and hung it on a hook by the door, before removing his Stetson. His long, white hair, beard, and mustache reminded her of Santa Claus himself.

He stuck out a large hand. “I’m Bart Stockton.”

She stuck out her own. His hand was rough and worn. “Belle Brooks. Come on into the kitchen.” She led the way and motioned to a chair before grabbing another mug out of the cupboard. She filled it for him and topped off her own.

He took a long swig. “That hits the spot. I’ve had a long drive.”

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“Eastern Montana, mostly. Been traveling a bit. Sure is pretty country out west here. At least, what I can see of it through the snow.”

“What brings you to Pine Meadows?”

“Just passing through. Getting a little short on funds, so thought I might stop for a while if I could find work.” His eyes had a sadness to them.

“What kind of work are you looking for?”

“Done about everything in my years. I’m good with horses and cattle. Probably, better than with people. Don’t much care for being cooped up inside. Like being in nature.”

Belle laughed. “Except for on days like today.”

He laughed, too. He had a nice laugh. “I reckon you’re right on that one.”

Belle got up and refilled his mug. “My son, Ryder, usually only hires additional help in the spring and summer.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured most places would be like that.”

Belle watched as he sipped his coffee. It was Christmas—the time of the year to be especially charitable, and he looked like he could use some charity. “How are you with Christmas lights?”

“Ma’am?”

“Christmas lights. Have any experience with hanging them?”

“Can’t say I’ve done much of that lately.” He got a faraway look in his eyes.

“Well, if you think you could climb a ladder and hang lights around a house and on the trees, I could offer you a temporary job.”

“Don’t see why I couldn’t do that.” He glanced out at the blowing snow.

“Of course, we’d have to wait until the snow clears. They’re saying it will most likely move out by tomorrow. My son doesn’t have much time to put them up this year, and he won’t let me get up on a ladder.”

“Smart son,” he said. “I’d be happy to hang them for you.”

“Great. When the snow stops, if you want to come back, I’ll put you to work.”

Bart stood. “Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate that. And the coffee. I’ll be back first thing tomorrow if this lets up. I’ll get out of your hair.” He headed to the living room and retrieved his hat, boots, and jacket. “You stay warm now.” He disappeared out into the snow.

Belle stood inside and watched until he’d turned his truck around and skidded up the lane and back onto the road. Interesting fellow. What was his story? She doubted that she’d ever see him again. They had a bunkhouse where Landon lived. She could have offered him a place to stay for the night, but Ryder would not have approved. It was smart to hold back on that until Ryder was home and could make his own judgments about this stranger. He might have some more odd jobs he could give him.

She walked back into the kitchen and put the mugs in the sink. She heard a faint cry from Cassidy’s room. She put all thoughts of Bart aside and went to pick up her granddaughter.

Chapter Two



Bart shifted his truck into the lowest gear and headed back toward Pine Meadows. He turned his windshield wipers on high as the thick, heavy snow piled up on the blades. He knew all too well how dangerous icy roads could be. He'd find a place to stay for the night and hunker down. In nice weather, he preferred to sleep in his truck or out under the stars, but it was a little too cold for that tonight. It took him almost a half hour to make it back to the small town.

If he remembered correctly, he'd passed two motels on the main street where all the businesses seemed to be located. There was the first one on the right. He slowed and read the sign which boasted indoor pool, weight room, and continental breakfast—too fancy for his tastes. He kept driving. At the edge of town was the second. It was a small, one-story building, with parking spaces right in front of the outside doors to the rooms. The neon sign flashed “Vacancy” and underneath “lean rooms.” He assumed the “C” was burned out. He smiled—a lean room was all he needed.

He stopped in front of the door marked “Office” and hurried inside. No one was in the tiny office. He pushed the bell on the counter, and a door opened. A disinterested young man sauntered out. “What can I do for you?”

“I'd like a room if you have one available.” Judging by the almost empty parking lot, it was a good bet they did.”

“That’ll be \$79 a night. Cash or credit?”

“Credit. One night is fine.” He handed over his card.

The man pushed a sign-in sheet in front of him and handed him a key. No fancy key cards here. “Number 3. Third door to your right. If the door doesn’t open right away, jiggle the key. There’s an ice machine at the end of the building. Used to be a pop machine too, but it’s broke.”

Bart took the key. “Is there a place to eat nearby?”

“There’s the diner a few blocks down and the Rusty Nail Saloon if you care for a drink with your meal. Both have decent food.”

“Thanks.” Not glowing recommendations, but then he wasn’t sure how much stock he’d put in the young man’s recommendations, anyway. He wasn’t a picky eater, but he hadn’t had anything to eat all day. A burger and a stiff drink would suit him fine.

He pulled his truck in front of his room and hurried inside. It was fine. Nothing fancy, but it had a king-sized bed, a small TV, and clean towels. It was all he needed.

He glanced in the large mirror as he passed. He looked a fright. His hair and beard both needed a good trim, and his clothes had been worn for several days. It was a wonder that Belle Brooks hadn’t taken one look at him and slammed her door in his face. Belle Brooks. What a nice, kind lady. And she was pretty, too. Not that he cared about that kind of thing, but he bet she was absolutely stunning in her younger years. Strands of blond hair showed through her gray. He’d always been partial to blondes—ever since that day he’d first laid eyes on a certain barrel racer. That had been it. His heart had never been his own after that.

He shook his head. That was a lifetime ago. His days of love and romance had passed. Now, he just survived. Sometimes he wondered why he even bothered. No one would miss him when he was gone. Some might even celebrate. The only thing that kept him going was the fact that life had taught him to never be a quitter.

He set down his duffle bag and pulled on his hat and gloves. He’d driven too many miles in the last week. It was early afternoon, but he was starving. He’d walk down the street and find that bar. He headed back toward the center of town. The snow blew in his face, clinging to his beard. There was next to no one out on the streets in this weather. The only vehicles, that passed by, were large ones with four-wheel-drive. He hoped this bar was still

open. There it was. He opened the door to the dim interior. There was a long, wooden bar along one side and booths and tables on the other with a dance floor and stage at the end. The place was deserted except for two cowboys at the far end of the bar.

“You open?” he asked the bartender as she looked up and smiled.

“Yep. Just not many folks out and about in this weather.”

He sat down on a stool at the end of the bar.

“What can I get for you?” She placed a coaster in front of him.

“Jack Daniels and coke. Make it a double. Do you have a menu?”

She handed him a stained sheet of paper and his drink. He barely glanced at it. “I’ll have the burger, well done, and fries.”

When she disappeared into the kitchen, he glanced around the room. It was much like small town bars everywhere. A few beer signs adorned the walls and an elk head hung at the end. He’d spent many a day in places like this over the past year, hoping to drink away the pain or, at least, numb it for a few hours.

“So, what brings you to Pine Meadows?” the bartender asked, setting silverware in front of him.

“Just passing through.”

“Well, you picked a bad day to do it.”

“Yeah, haven’t had much luck recently.”

“I hope you’re not going to try and drive over the pass. I hear they may close it down soon.”

“Naw, I got a room for the night. I’m looking for some ranch work. Know anyone hiring?” He fully intended to hang those lights for Belle, but once he did that, he’d be out of work again.

“Can’t say that I do. Things slow down here during the winter months. Pine Mountain Ranch north of town is pretty well-known, but I doubt they’d be hiring now.”

“Yeah. I stopped there this morning. Doesn’t sound like they have anything.”

“Too bad. The Brooks are wonderful people.” She served his food and left him to eat in silence. As he ate, he downed his drink and motioned for another. With any luck, a few drinks would knock him out for the rest of the day.



Relief washed over Belle when she saw Haley's SUV come down the lane. Noah jumped out and ran into the house. "Grandma, Grandma, guess what?" he yelled.

"What?"

"We got the rest of the day off from school because it's snowing, and we may get the WHOLE day off tomorrow."

"That's so fun," she replied as Haley followed him in the door.

"How are the roads?"

Haley took Cassidy from her arms. "Not terrible, but the snow is getting deep."

"I'm glad you're home."

"Yeah, I wish Ryder was back, too. He called, and they have the horse loaded and are heading this way."

"Well, good. They'll be here soon, then. Noah, I made some Christmas cookie dough this morning, so after lunch, would you like to help me cut them into shapes and decorate them?"

"I would. I can make really pretty ones with lots of sprinkles."

Belle smiled. Since Noah's arrival, her cookies were a lot less professional-looking, and had a lot more icing, but to her, they were so much better. "The more sprinkles the better."

As the afternoon passed, Belle and Noah finished several dozen cookies with Haley's help for the hour that Cassidy slept. Belle had also put a pot roast in the crock pot for dinner. The snow continued to fall as the wind howled and blew large drifts in front of the house. Several times, Belle considered going out and shoveling the porch and walkway, but she knew Ryder would yell at her for that, too, so he and Landon would have to do it when they got back.

She was about to put dinner on the table when Noah yelled. "Look, Daddy's back."

Sure enough, his large truck and trailer pulled up beside the barn. Haley visibly let out a sigh of relief.

"Can I go out and see him?" Noah asked.

“No, it’s snowing too hard, and dinner is almost ready. I’m sure he’ll be in soon.”

Noah frowned and stomped his foot.

Belle had set the table and put out the food when Ryder and Landon walked in the back door. They were covered in snow. Removing his boots, wet jacket, and hat, Ryder pulled Haley into his arms.

“I’m so glad you’re home. How were the roads?”

“Not great, but you know my truck. It can make it through anything. I was just glad they hadn’t closed the pass. Not many vehicles on the road, which was nice. Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetheart. How’s the horse?”

“He’s fantastic—just what I was looking for, and he seemed to survive the ride well. He’s in a big stall at the arena. I’ll go check on him again after we eat. It sure smells good in here.”

“Grandma and I made cookies.”

“I can see that.”

“Do you want one?”

“After dinner. Landon and I are starving.”

They all sat down, and Belle said grace, thanking God for bringing her whole family home safely.

Ryder filled his plate and asked, “What’s new around here?”

Noah spoke up first. “I got the afternoon off from school and maybe tomorrow, too.”

“Lucky you.”

“I hired someone to put up the Christmas lights as soon as the snow stops,” Belle said.

Ryder turned to her. “Mom, I told you I’d get to it.”

“I know, but you’re busy, and it’s already December first.”

“Who in the heck did you hire to do it?”

“Some guy who showed up this morning. He was looking for work. Said he had experience with horses and cattle.”

Ryder shook his head. “So, you hired him to put up lights?”

She bristled. “He looked like he needed a job, and I didn’t think you were hiring.”

“Who is he? Do you know anything about him?”

“His name is Bart Stockton. He looked down and out. Said something

about being from Eastern Montana. He said he could handle putting up lights.” Belle left out the part of the story where she invited him into their home for coffee.

“I don’t know, Mom. Hiring a stranger?”

“Son, it’s Christmas and the time to be extra charitable. You know I like to help people who need it. It was the right thing to do.”

Haley spoke up. “I agree with Mom. You took me in when I had nowhere to go and look at us now.” She reached over and squeezed her husband’s hand. “Sometimes, people just need a hand up.”

“I guess you’re right.” Ryder turned to Landon. “Want to make a bet on whether this drifter, who was looking for ranch work, shows back up to hang Christmas lights? He’s probably long gone by now.”

Belle frowned at her son. “He’ll be back. I have a good feeling about him.”

“Well, if he does show, I’ll be willing to let him put up the lights. I’ve never liked doing it, but then we’ll send him on his way. We don’t need another mouth to feed this winter.”

Chapter Three



Bart opened his eyes. It was still dark. He got up and looked out the window. The snow had stopped. His head throbbed, so he downed a glass of water and a couple ibuprofen. The small clock by the bed read 6:00. When he'd passed the diner last night, he'd noticed that they opened at six. He wanted to get an early start, but not too early. He had no idea what time the Brooks household awoke, but if he knew ranchers, they were usually up by first light.

He decided to jump in the shower and perhaps look a little more presentable today. Then, he'd head to the diner, grab a quick bite to fuel him through the day, and drive to the Pine Mountain Ranch.

A half hour later, he'd combed and dried his long hair and put on the only clean clothes he had left in his bag. He stepped outside the door as the sun appeared above the horizon in the eastern sky. The sky had cleared, and with it, the temperature had plummeted. He estimated it was barely above zero. He threw his bag and other belongings in his truck. He had no intention of coming back here. Once he'd finished the Christmas lights, he'd head west and try to find something more permanent.

The diner was more crowded than he'd anticipated. Several hearty souls were already eating when he walked in. He took a stool at the counter

and ordered coffee, two eggs, hashbrowns, bacon, and toast. He didn't want to work in the cold on an empty stomach. By the time he'd finished, the ibuprofen had kicked in and he felt almost human. He headed north out of town and was pleased to see the roads had already been plowed.

For the first time, he noticed the resort at the top of the canyon. No doubt, the road was plowed to allow employees and guests to access what looked like a pretty fancy place. Once he passed it, the road was less clear but still passable. He shifted into four-wheel-drive and slowed as a herd of deer hopped across the road in front of him. He turned on the dirt road leading to the ranch. It had also been plowed but a few inches of snow had fallen on top. The warm sunshine would soon melt the rest away. When he reached the lane into Pine Mountain Ranch, he was impressed to see that it was actually cleared better than the public roads. That was the sign of a responsible rancher. He drove slowly and parked in the same spot as yesterday.

And the same as yesterday, Belle greeted him as he got out of his truck. This time, she was dressed in snow boots, a heavy parka, mittens, and a stocking cap. She looked adorable all bundled up. "Good morning, Mr. Stockton."

"Morning. Ma'am." He tipped his hat.

"Belle. Please call me Belle. We're not formal around here."

"In that case, please call me Bart."

"It's awfully cold. Are you sure you want to climb up on a ladder in this weather?"

"Well, there doesn't seem to be much of a breeze, so I reckon I won't fall off. I'm used to the cold—actually prefer it to heat."

"Okay, then." Her breath came out in little puffs of vapor in the cold air. "First, we'll need to find you a ladder. I think Ryder, my son, has hidden it from me. Come on down to the barn."

He followed her across a large open area with a path shoveled down the middle. She pushed open a large door, and a gust of warm air rushed out. "This is our indoor arena."

"Impressive." It was one of the nicer ones he'd seen. In the middle of the arena, a young man was exercising a horse on a lunge line. When he saw them, he stopped and walked over to the fence.

"Ryder, this is Bart Stockton. The man I told you about. Bart, this is my son, Ryder Brooks."

Ryder stuck his hand through the fence. He had a nice, firm handshake. Bart had always said you could tell a lot about a man from his handshake. “Pleased to meet you. That’s one fine-looking quarter horse stud you got there. Sixteen hands?”

“Yes. You know horses. We brought him home yesterday, so I’m checking him out.”

“You got a good one.”

Belle smiled at her son. “Where’s the ladder? Bart wants to get started on the lights.”

“It’s out back in the storage shed. I’ll go unlock it for you.” Ryder tied the horse to the rail.

Belle glanced over at Bart. “See, what did I tell you?”

He smiled. He liked being in on a private joke with a pretty lady. They walked a few feet outside, and Ryder opened the door and grabbed a long extension ladder.

“I can carry it from here.” Bart stepped up and took it from Ryder. “Enjoy that horse.” He headed back toward the front of the house with Belle beside him. She walked up onto the porch and removed a large tarp. Underneath were bins of lights.

“So, most of these are multi-colored. We use them all around the eaves of the house and wrap them down the pillars on the porch. She pointed up to the roof. As you can see, I started there, before Ryder stopped me. The rest of that strand is buried somewhere in the snow on the roof.”

He chuckled. He could picture her up on the ladder defying both gravity and her son. She was a force to be reckoned with. “Got it.”

“Once you finish with those, there are blue lights for the pine trees in the yard. If you have any questions, knock on the door, and I’ll come out. Also, there’s always a hot pot of coffee in the kitchen. If you need a break or get cold, come on in and help yourself.”

“Thank you, ma’am—Belle. I’ll get started and let you go inside and warm up.”

She waved as she walked into the house. Bart had only spent a matter of minutes around her, and he already admired her strength. Not many folks did that to him. He didn’t warm up to people easily. She was someone who could mess with his head, and his head was already messed up enough. Good thing this was temporary. By tonight, she’d only be a fleeting memory.



Belle smiled as she walked into the kitchen. There was something about Bart that she liked. Maybe it was that he'd kept his word and showed up first thing this morning.

Noah came running into the kitchen in his footed pajamas with a large reindeer on the front. Could he be any cuter? "Grandma, is that Santa Claus out there on that ladder?"

She laughed. "No, but he kinda looks like Santa, doesn't he?"

"Are you sure? He has a long, white beard."

"Pretty sure. His name is Bart, and he's putting up the lights around the house."

"Cool. Can I have a Christmas cookie for breakfast?"

"After you have some eggs and toast."

"What are we going to do today since I don't have school? Bake more cookies?"

"We made enough cookies yesterday, but you can help me put up the train that goes around the Christmas village."

"Yay. I love the train."

Haley joined them with baby Cassidy in her arms.

Noah pulled on the edge of her sweater. "Mom, look. Do you think that's Santa out there? Grandma says it's not, but he has a long, white beard like Santa."

Haley laughed. "If Grandma says it's not him then we should believe her. Sit down and eat your breakfast." Haley walked to the cupboard and smiled at Belle. "So, he showed up, huh?"

"Yep. Bright and early. Just like I said he would. I'm pretty good at reading people."

Haley glanced out the window. "He does look like Santa."



Belle was finishing up the breakfast dishes when there was a knock on the front door. She wiped her hands and went to open it.

Bart smiled. "I'd like to take you up on your offer of some coffee."

"I told you that you could help yourself. No need to knock."

"I know, but it didn't feel right to walk into your home."

"Come on." She led the way to the kitchen where she grabbed an insulated mug and filled it for him. "This is my daughter-in-law, Haley, and my two grandkids, Noah and Cassidy."

Bart removed his stocking cap. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too," said Haley.

"Those are some fine-looking young'uns you have there."

"Thanks. Do you have grandkids?"

"Nope. I'm sad to say I haven't been blessed with any."

Noah stared at him. "Are you Santa Claus?"

He let out a deep laugh. "No, son. I'm far from Santa."

"But you have a long, white beard."

"I'm just an old cowboy. Beards keep a man's face warm in the Montana winter."

"Do you have a horse?"

Bart hesitated. "Not with me. Had one back home." He stared out the window. "How about you? Do you have your own horse?"

"I do." Noah puffed out his chest. "His name is Tornado, and he is the best horse ever. Do you want to see him?"

Belle interrupted. This wasn't a family friend. Bart was a stranger hired to do a job. "Mr. Stockton is putting up our Christmas lights. Maybe you can show him later."

"Aww." Noah turned back to Bart, clearly fascinated. "Are you going to put lights all the way around the house and on all of the trees?"

"That's the plan."

"Cool. I love Christmas lights."

"I'm kinda partial to them myself. Thanks, for the coffee. I'll get back to work."

Belle smiled at him. "You can go out the back door there. And use it to come back in for a refill, whenever."

He tipped his hat and was gone. There was something charming and mysterious about him.

"He seems nice," Haley said.

"He does, doesn't he?"

“I bet he’s lived quite the life. Too bad he seems to be alone this time of year. Have I told you recently how thankful I am that I found this family?” Haley walked over and gave her a hug.

“We’re thankful for you, too, dear. I believe everyone comes into our lives for a reason. I wonder what Bart’s is?”

“I think, it’s to put up our Christmas lights,” Noah said.

“Maybe so.” She couldn’t help thinking that it might be something more. Did she want it to be something more? She couldn’t stand the thought of anyone being alone at Christmas.

After setting up the train with Noah, Belle went back to the kitchen and started a large pot of chili. It was one of her specialties. She’d make enough for them to have for lunch and dinner and tomorrow, too. It would warm them up on such a cold, winter day. She’d start some homemade bread to go with it.



Bart moved the ladder around the house, careful to dig through the snow to make sure it had a firm foundation. Although ladders, and heights in general, had never scared him, hitting the frozen ground at his age might not be a great idea. How many times had he voluntarily climbed onto the back of a thousand-pound animal that wanted nothing more than to throw him on the ground? Too many to count. But that was forty years ago. He liked to think he’d gotten smarter with age.

In warm weather, he would have climbed on the roof itself to install the lights, but the foot of snow covering it prevented that, so he had to make the best of moving the ladder every few feet. It was slow going, but with any luck, he’d have the nice lady’s lights up by the end of the day. Despite the fact that the temperature hovered just above zero, the bright Montana sun, beating down on him, made it feel much warmer.

He made it all the way around the eaves, and was starting on the columns on the porch, when Belle walked out of the house. “Wow. It looks great. Come in and join us for lunch.” She walked over to a large bell and pulled the rope to ring it. “The guys will be up in a minute.”

“You really don’t have to feed me.”

“Nonsense. A man’s got to eat. I made a big pot of chili. There’s plenty for everyone. Come on in when you’re ready.”

“That does sound mighty good. I guess I can take a short break.” As much as he didn’t like to admit it, arthritis had set into most of his joints. No doubt, the result of so many injuries when he was younger. It would feel good to warm up. He finished the pillar he was working on and headed to the back door.

Once inside the mud room, he removed his hat, boots, gloves, and coat. Belle, Haley, and Noah were already seated at the table. Ryder walked in behind him with another cowboy.

“Bart, this is Landon Waters, our foreman.”

“Nice to meet you.” Bart shook his hand.

“Glad you could join us for lunch. Nothing Belle likes better than feeding people.”

There were bowls stacked on the counter, and they each helped themselves to the chili. Once they all were seated, Ryder started asking questions. Bart was used to folks asking questions—he just didn’t like giving answers. After all, he was only here for the day. The less he had to reveal about himself, the better. Short answers had become his trademark.

“So, Mom says you’re from eastern Montana?”

“Yep.” he said between bites.

“Whereabouts? I’ve spent some time over there.”

“Oh, here and there. Had a ranch near the border.”

Ryder frowned. “What brings you to Pine Meadows?”

“Thought a change of scenery might be nice. I’ve never spent much time in this part of the state.”

Belle gave Ryder a look. “Stop pestering the man and let him eat.”

Ryder turned his attention to his meal, and Bart was relieved. When Ryder finished, he turned to him again. “Looks like you’ll be ready to do the trees soon. We have one of those long poles with a hook on the end that you can use to get the lights to the tops. I’ll dig it out.”

“Much obliged.”

Ryder and Landon stood to leave. “Mom, we’ll be in the arena if you need us.”

Was that a comment pointed at him? Don’t mess with my Mom. As though he had any ill will toward the kind lady who’d given him work and

fed him.

Bart finished his second bowl. “Thanks for the meal. It was the best chili I’ve had in a good, long time. I’ll get back to work, too. I should have all the lights up for you this afternoon.”

“Thanks, you’re a godsend.”

He laughed. He didn’t know about that. God and he hadn’t exactly been on speaking terms for a while now. “Just trying to earn a day’s wages, ma’am. I doubt God would send the likes of me.” He hurried out the door. When he got outside, he saw that Ryder had laid the pole on the porch.

Bart worked for a couple more hours until all the lights were strung. Then, he untangled the box of extension cords and connected everything. Lastly, he plugged them into the outlet on the porch and checked to see that they all came on. Not bad. It was hard to tell in the daylight, but it should look nice when night fell.

He picked up the pole and the ladder and headed toward the arena. He leaned them against the wall and walked inside. Ryder was working with another horse. It was a young gelding, who was fighting him at every turn. He pulled the horse to a stop. “Did you need something?”

“I’m all done. I wondered where you’d like me to put the ladder and pole. I didn’t want to leave them for you to clean up.”

“I appreciate that. There’s a storage shed around back.”

The horse shook his head and pawed the ground.

“That one’s got some spirit.”

“Too much for his own good. He’s been fighting me all the way.”

“I could give him a try.”

Ryder eyed him. “You know much about breaking horses?”

“A fair amount.”

To Bart’s surprise, Ryder dismounted and motioned him into the arena. “Have at it. His name is Diablo, and he lives up to it.

Bart walked slowly up to the beautiful animal, talking softly to him the entire way. Diablo didn’t flinch. Ryder stepped back as Bart ran his hand down the horse’s neck and put his foot in the stirrup. Diablo jumped forward as Bart swung easily into the saddle. “Whoa, boy.” Bart continued to talk to the horse as he guided him slowly around the arena. He could feel Diablo relax. It was all about letting the horse know that you weren’t the enemy. He eased him into a canter. It felt amazing to be back on a horse. It had been a

few weeks. This was where he belonged.

Chapter Four



After fifteen or twenty minutes, Bart slowed Diablo to a stop in front of where Ryder stood on the rail. Ryder climbed down beside him. “That was some ride.”

“He’s a great horse. A little green, but he wants to learn.” Bart dismounted and handed the reins to Ryder. “I’d love to hear more about your operation.”

Ryder smiled. “Come on, then. I’ll put this guy in his stall, and I’ll show you where to put the ladder.”

As they walked, Ryder explained about their breeding business and how he was trying to also move into the training space—both of riders and horses. “This ranch belonged to my dad and his dad before that. They thought small—content to breed some of the best quarter horses around. Nothing wrong with that, but I told my mom when I came home and agreed to take over, that I wanted to expand. One of the first things I did was build this arena. I’ve got lots of ideas for the future. I want to leave something even better for my kids.”

“Looks like you’re headed in the right direction. Noah seems like a great kid.”

“He’s the best.”

They reached the storage shed, and Ryder opened the door while Bart carried the ladder inside and stood it against the wall. He walked back outside. The wind had picked up and was blowing snow into drifts around the yard. Time to get on his way before they closed the roads again. “Do you have a check for me, or do I need to talk to your mother?”

Ryder stopped and looked him up and down. “I have a better idea. Mom said you were looking for work with horses. It appears you’re good at it. Landon is leaving tomorrow until the first of the year for a few weeks with his family. It wouldn’t hurt to have someone to help me out around here. It would only be until he gets back in January, but I can offer you a job through the holidays. You interested?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Great. I can’t pay much, but it comes with free room and board—three solid meals a day. We have a bunkhouse down that path. It’s nothing fancy, but it should keep out the cold. There’s a wood stove that keeps it pretty toasty. Sleeps up to eight, if need be, but Landon is the only one who lives there right now, so you’ll have it all to yourself.”

“I don’t need much—just a place to lay my head. And if lunch was any example of your mom’s cooking, I’ll gain a few pounds.” Bart rubbed his stomach.

“You’re hired. I pay on Fridays, but if you were counting on the money from today, I can go ahead and pay you for that.”

“Nope. If I’m staying, Friday will be fine.”

Landon walked toward them.

“Landon, Bart is going to be staying in the bunkhouse while you’re away. Can you take him down and show him around?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Ryder turned back to Bart. “Take the rest of the day to get settled. Meals are at seven, noon, and six. Mom rings the bell when the food is on the table. Welcome aboard.”

Bart walked to his truck and grabbed the old duffel bag which contained all of the earthly possessions he’d brought with him. It was easier to travel light. He followed Landon down the trail to an old, one-story, wooden structure.

Landon turned the door handle, but it didn’t budge. He shoved it open with his shoulder. “It sticks a little. It’s not fancy, but the Brooks are great

people. You won't find none better."

The room was filled with four bunk beds. Landon obviously had made himself at home on one, so Bart picked the one farthest away to give him space and threw down his bag. Next, Landon led him down a narrow hallway with a bathroom on one side. At the end, was a small living room with a couch, a table, a few chairs, and the wood-burning stove.

Landon turned to him. "That's it. Make yourself at home. I have some things to get done before I leave tomorrow. See you at dinner." He walked out the door.

Bart looked around. He'd lived in worse. It would be nice to settle down even if it was only for a few weeks. He unpacked his few meager belongings and stashed them in the dresser next to the bunk he'd chosen, then he lay down on the bunk and stared at the ceiling. He remembered when he'd loved the Christmas season. Now it was just another month to get through.



It was Friday, and Bart had been at the Pine Mountain Ranch for three days now. Ryder had kept him busy working with really magnificent horses. He'd only seen Belle at meals, but she'd stayed cheerful and welcoming.

Ryder walked up to him in the arena where he was working with a young horse. "I've got a paycheck for you."

Bart dismounted and walked over to him.

"Thought you might want to run into town and cash it before five. I'm taking the rest of the day off to spend with Haley and the kids. Go ahead and take the afternoon off. You've earned your keep this week."

"Thanks."

As Ryder left the building, Bart got back on the horse. He'd finish with this one and call it a day. An hour later, he parked on Main Street in Pine Meadows. First, he stopped at the only bank in town and cashed his check. When they saw it was from Pine Mountain Ranch, they didn't even ask for his ID. The perks of a small town.

Back out on the street, he glanced up and down and spotted a hair salon. It was time for a trim. A smiling young lady greeted him as he walked in the door of Meadows Magic Manes. It was a little fancy for his taste—he'd

have preferred a barber shop, but it seemed to be the only option in Pine Meadows.

“Welcome. What can we do for you?”

“I’d like a haircut.”

The lady stared down at an appointment book. “Cindy will be available in a few minutes, if you’d like to have a seat.”

“Okay, thanks.” He sat and looked at the selection of magazines. They were all suggestions of hair trends and styles. He didn’t need trendy. Instead, he stared out the window onto Main Street. It was adorned with strings of lights and wreaths on every lamp post. A few people scurried by with full bags. It was that time of year.

“Mr. Stockton? I’m ready for you.” A petite blonde smiled at him and led him to a chair. “How much would you like me to take off today?”

He almost said just a trim, but for some reason, for the first time in a long time, he wanted to look his best. He removed his Stetson and stared in the mirror at his straggly beard, a full six or seven inches, and long locks of hair falling over his shoulders. “I need a change. I want to keep the beard but trim it to an inch or so. Maybe cut my hair to just above my shoulders.” He made a motion with his hands. “I work outside so I need to keep some length to stay warm in the winter.”

“I can do that. Let’s give you some layers and a little style. You’ll look like a new man.”

Bart almost said no, but what the heck? It would always grow back. “Work your magic.”

When she turned him back to the mirror a half hour later, he couldn’t believe the difference. He looked like a proper, distinguished gentleman, not the scruffy old cowhand who’d walked in the door.

“Do you like it?”

“It’ll take some gettin’ used to, but yeah, it’s good. Thank you.” He paid the cashier and left Cindy a sizeable tip.

As he walked back toward his car, he noticed a Western-wear store. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d shopped for clothes. The last two years, he hadn’t cared enough and before that, Connie had picked out all his clothes. He didn’t need fancy to train horses, but he wanted to look a little nicer at family dinners. Besides, all his clothes were dirty. Until he figured out if he could do laundry at the ranch or found a laundromat, he needed

something to wear. He entered the store and made his way to the men's department. He wasn't much of a shopper. He quickly found his favorite size and style of Wrangler jeans and grabbed two pairs. Next, he noticed a sale table with two-packs of flannel shirts. Looked fine. He grabbed a pack. He also added a fleece jacket in a nice, bright blue. Then, he found a six-pack of underwear and a six pack of warm socks. That should do it. He made his way to the cash register.

"Find everything you were looking for?"

"Yep. This will do fine." He handed over most of his earnings and hurried back to his truck—clothing issue solved for a few more days.

When he got back to the ranch, he jumped in the shower and dressed in a new pair of jeans, a blue flannel, and of course, clean underwear and socks. He felt like a new man. Probably no one would notice, but it still felt good. When the dinner bell rang, he hurried up to the main house.

Belle let out a low whistle as he walked through the kitchen door. "Who is this handsome gentleman?"

His face warmed. "It was time for a trim."

"Well, you look very dapper."

A feeling of warmth spread through his insides. He hadn't gotten a compliment from a pretty lady in quite a while. "Thank you."

The table was only set for two. "Where is everyone?" he asked.

"Ryder took Haley and the kids into town to see Santa and have dinner out, so it's only you and me tonight."

Something smelled wonderful. "You didn't have to cook for just me. I could have fixed a sandwich or something."

"Nonsense. I like to cook, and I had to eat. Might as well have company."

"I appreciate you." It was her turn to turn a light shade of red. Surely, someone as attractive as Belle was used to getting compliments.

Belle turned to the oven and took out a warm dish. "I hope you like baked burritos. They are a little too spicy for the kids, so I save them for nights like these." Why did she suddenly feel shy in her own home? This wasn't a date. He worked for her. But there was something about his new look. He almost reminded her of Sam Elliott or Sean Connery. And if she wasn't mistaken, he had new clothes on, too. Had he dressed up just for her?

“Sounds delicious. I’ve yet to taste anything you’ve cooked that isn’t.”

She served both of them and sat down across from him. “How was your day?”

He launched into a description of the training technique he was trying on a young horse. She could tell he loved horses. She relaxed as they laughed and shared thoughts. This was enjoyable.

When he’d finished eating, he asked. “Where do your cowhands do their laundry? Is there somewhere here on the ranch? I’m about out of clean clothes.”

“You can use our washer and dryer. It’s right there behind the mudroom. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“That’s very kind of you.” He glanced at his watch. “Would you care if I threw in a load right now?”

“Not at all. Go right ahead. Tell you what. I’m going to make a pot of tea and enjoy it with some Christmas cookies in the living room. Why don’t you go get your laundry and join me while you wait?”

He smiled. He had a nice smile. There was a dimple on either side of his mouth that she hadn’t noticed before through his long beard. “I don’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“No trouble. I’d like the company.”

“Okay then. I’ll get my laundry and be right back.”

Belle hummed a Christmas carol as she cleared the table and made a pot of tea. She got out a Christmas platter and arranged several of her sugar cookies on it. Before she’d finished, Bart was back.

“There’s detergent and fabric softener on the washer.”

He disappeared into the laundry room and then joined her in the kitchen.

“How are you at building a fire? It’s not my best skill,” Belle said.

“Pretty fair, I’d say.”

“Great, there’s wood by the hearth if you want to start one for us. It’ll take the chill off on this frigid night.”

“On it.”

Belle watched him walk into the other room. Suddenly, she didn’t feel chilly at all. In fact, was it hot in here? She carried the platter to the coffee table, poured herself a cup of tea, and sat down in her favorite chair. In no

time, he had a fire roaring.

Bart poured himself a cup and grabbed a couple of cookies, before sitting in the chair across from her. “Let me guess, Noah helped make these.”

Belle laughed. “How could you tell?”

He stared at the giant glob of icing on the top. “Just a lucky guess.” He had a nice smile.

Belle realized she still knew next to nothing about this man. She wanted to know more. “So, Bart, you said you don’t have grandchildren?”

“No. I do get a kick out of Noah and Cassidy though. Did I hear you mention other grandkids?”

“Yes, my daughter, Annie, lives down in Pine Meadows. She has two boys, Cody and Dustin. They’re about the same age as Noah.” How had he turned the conversation back to her? She tried again.

“Do you have children?”

“Just one daughter—she lives in Billings. She’s not married. She works in some kind of finance. We’re not close.” He frowned.

She didn’t want to push it. “That’s too bad. Especially around the holidays.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to Mr. Brooks? Ryder mentioned this ranch was owned by his dad and before that, his granddad.”

“Gordon, Ryder’s dad, was my first husband. He died of a heart attack almost fifteen years ago. This was his family’s ranch. I grew up in Butte. I was eighteen when I met him at a local rodeo and horse show. Gordon was ten years older and had already taken over the running of this ranch. He was in town to buy some horses. I guess you could say it was love at first sight. I came back to this ranch with him, and we married six months later. I’ve never left.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. You said he was your first husband?”

“Yeah, I was so lonely when he died. Ryder and Annie were still in high school at the time. I married Larry, a long-time neighbor and friend, a short time after that. He was good to me although old-fashioned and set in his ways. He and Ryder didn’t get along. Ryder wanted to make changes to the horse program, and he didn’t. Ryder left for college and stayed away for ten years. Then, Larry got cancer and when he passed, Ryder agreed to come back and help me out. I’m lucky that he decided to stay.”

“Wow, that’s quite the story.” Bart sipped his tea. “I didn’t mean to

pry.”

“It’s fine. Nothing I’ve done is a secret. What about you? Ever married?”

Bart hesitated. Was he going to answer? She waited.

“Yeah. Like you, I met my wife, Connie, at a rodeo. I was eighteen and a new bronc rider. That summer, there was this trick rider who traveled with the rodeo. Every cowboy between the ages of three and eighty fell in love with her. She was twenty-four with long, blonde hair, and the stunts she did were amazing. The star bronc riders in their twenties tried everything to get her to notice them, but she shot them all down. I didn’t even try—I was a wet-behind-the-ears kid.

“Anyway, one day, she started talking to me. We talked a lot, then it turned into something more. I have no idea what she saw in me, but I was flattered that she did. I fell in love with her fast. I’d never been in love, and all I wanted was to spend the rest of my life with her. I worked up the courage to ask her to marry me, and we were married before I turned twenty. Best decision of my life.”

He paused and wiped away a tear from his eye. “We had many happy years together, first on the rodeo circuit and then on her family’s ranch. She died in a car accident two years ago. Drunk driver. She and her dad were both killed instantly.” He stopped and looked away.

Belle didn’t know what to say. She wanted to get up and give him a hug, but she didn’t know him well enough for that. “I guess we’ve both had our losses. If you live long enough, you’re bound to lose someone you love. I try every day to be grateful for what I have.”

They both stared into the fire, lost in their own thoughts. Finally, he broke the silence. “I’d better go check on my clothes and throw them in the dryer.” He got up and walked out of the room.

When he returned, he said, “I’ll get out of your hair. Do you care if I leave my clothes to dry and get them in the morning?”

“No, that’s fine. Feel free to use the washer and dryer whenever you want. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” He placed his Stetson back on his head and headed toward the door. Belle watched him walk away. She was glad he was here. Having someone around who was her own age and had been through a loss like her own was comforting. He seemed sad. She’d do her best to give him a

merry Christmas. It was the least she could do.

Chapter Five



Bart awoke from a restless sleep before sunrise. The small, old alarm clock by his bed read 5:00. It was cold in the bunkhouse. He got up and threw a couple of logs into the wood-burning stove to take the chill off. A thermometer that hung outside one of the windows said -5. They wouldn't be working outside today. He was fortunate to have found a job with an indoor arena.

He sat down in an old rocking chair that squeaked with every movement—the only sound in the quiet pre-dawn air. Outside, he heard the howl of a coyote somewhere in the distance. In the summertime, a cowboy would be up and ready to work by now, but this time of year, the sun didn't rise until almost seven.

He leaned back and thought about last night's conversation with Belle. He usually didn't share so much about his life with Connie with others. In fact, he didn't usually talk about her at all—not since he'd left The Flying V Ranch. It was too painful. But something about Belle had made him feel safe enough to share. Maybe it was that she'd shared her own story with him, but it seemed like a little bit more. She appeared to be a compassionate person and yet not the type to pity him. He hated pity.

He'd enjoyed his evening alone with her. He'd like to do that more

often, but he doubted there'd be many chances here on the ranch. He glanced out at the lights he'd hung on the trees which shone brightly in the darkness. They were set to be on from dusk to dawn. The last two years, he'd pretended that Christmas didn't come. He didn't want to be around anyone. Not even his own daughter. He couldn't be cheery and festive when there was such a huge hole in his heart. Without Connie, it had all seemed worthless. His only friend had frequently become a bottle of Jack Daniels. It never made him happy, but it did numb the pain.

He realized that he hadn't had a drink since he was hired by Pine Mountain Ranch. Hadn't needed one. Maybe he was finally turning a corner.

As he stood, his old bones creaked almost as much as the old chair. Injuries from his rodeo days came back to haunt him in the form of more aches and pains than most folks. The price he'd paid for fame and fortune. Had it all been worth it? Sometimes in his dreams, he still heard the roar of the crowds cheering him on. It had been quite the ego boost for a teenager who didn't feel like he fit in anywhere. What would it have been like to have been raised on a ranch like this? That Noah was one lucky kid. Roots were important, and since Connie died, he had none.

At 6:45, he wandered up to the main house. He'd fold his laundry and bring it back to the bunkhouse before breakfast. He didn't want it to be in the family's way if they had laundry to do. The sky was turning a faint orange as he crunched through the snow to the house. Dang, it was cold. He quietly opened the back door and slipped in so as not to awake anyone who was still asleep. The sweet aroma of coffee and bacon filled his nostrils. Belle was not only up but she'd been busy. He hung up his Stetson and walked into the kitchen.

“Mornin’.”

Belle was seated at the table with a coffee mug in her hands. She smiled that charming smile she had. “Mornin’. Coffee’s ready. Pour yourself a cup.”

“I will, but first I want to grab my laundry.” He walked into the laundry room where he expected to find his laundry slightly wrinkled in the dryer. Instead, everything was neatly folded and stacked in a bright-colored laundry basket. He grabbed it and walked back into the kitchen. “Thank you, Belle. You didn't need to fold my clothes.”

“I know, but I was awake for a while after you left last night, and I

figured I'd save you from wrinkles. It was no problem."

"Well, I'm much obliged. No one has folded my laundry since..." he stopped. Saying Connie's death was still too painful.

"Leave it in the mudroom until after breakfast. Come have some coffee with me in the peace and quiet before we're invaded by the kids."

"Alright." He grabbed a mug, filled it, and sat across from her. "It's a chilly one out there today." Was he really talking about the weather? After what they'd shared last night, he suddenly felt nervous. The weather was a safe subject.

"Montana winters. It's always the coldest leading up to the holidays. I hope the bunkhouse is staying warm enough for you."

"Yeah, it's fine. The woodstove is great."

He heard the patter of little footsteps as Noah burst into the kitchen. "Good morning, Grandma." He gave Belle a hug. "Good morning, Mr. Bart." Noah ran around the table to give him a hug, too.

"Good morning, Noah." The way the child had already accepted him as part of his family—he fought to not choke on his words. "How was Santa Claus?"

"It was great! I told him everything I want for Christmas, and he said he'd see what he could do." Noah sat down on one of the chairs. "Can I have cereal?"

"How do you ask?" Belle said.

"Please, may I have cereal?"

"Yes." Belle jumped up to get him a bowl. She was a good grandma.

Bart turned to Noah. "So, what did you ask Santa for?"

"Lots of things. A new saddle, Paw Patrol trucks, a bike, some play dough, and a tree house."

Bart laughed at the last item. "A tree house?"

"Yeah, you know one up high in a tree where no one can go except for me—unless I invite them."

"Do you think Santa can get that in his sleigh?"

Noah shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. He is magic, you know."

Oh, the optimism of small children. Bart wished he still had some of that. Or he'd ever had that. As a child, all he'd hoped for was a warm roof over his head at Christmas. Presents had been few and far between.

"That he is."

Their conversation was interrupted by Ryder and Haley walking in the room with Cassidy.

Noah spoke up again. “Cassidy didn’t ask Santa for anything. She’s too little, so I asked him for some toys for her, too.”

“That was nice of you.”

Haley smiled. “He’s a great big brother.” She set Cassidy in a baby seat and handed her a toy. Noah leaned over to entertain her.

Belle got up and took a platter of pancakes and one of bacon and set them in the middle of the table. “Eat up. You’re going to need something to keep you warm out there today.”

Noah looked at Ryder. “Can I ride Tornado this morning, Daddy?”

“This afternoon, if it warms up a bit, you can ride in the arena. Even though it’s heated, it’s still cool in weather like this. You should stay inside with your mom and Cassidy this morning.”

“Aww.” Noah frowned as he took a big bite of pancake.

“Don’t forget Santa is watching you,” Haley said.

“Okay, but after lunch, I want to ride.”

Bart looked at Ryder. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

“I think we’ll move as many horses as we can into the barn. Then, we’ll put plenty of hay out for the rest. After that, we can work a couple of the young colts in the arena. Sound good?”

“Whatever you say. A little cold hasn’t ever stopped me.” He’d only admit to himself that the cold bothered his joints more and more each year, but pain was something he could handle. It wouldn’t keep him from a day’s work until he was dead and buried. Cowboys were tough, and he was a cowboy through and through.



Once the men had finished eating and headed outside, Belle cleared the empty plates and carried them to the sink.

“Do you need help?” Haley asked.

“No, I got it. Why don’t you go into the living room and play with the kids? I’ll join you in a bit.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

Belle smiled. Although help was nice, sometimes she preferred having her kitchen to herself. Especially, if it meant not having the little ones under her feet. She did the dishes and put away the leftover food, then she sat down at the clean table with a fresh cup of coffee and worked on the morning crossword. From the living room, she could hear the laughter of her grandkids. She was lucky to live in the same house with them, instead of miles away like some of her friends. She tried hard to give them their own space. She never wanted to be a burden.

At the sound of crunching snow, she looked out to see a vehicle coming down the lane. It was Annie. She'd said she might stop by this morning with the boys. Belle smiled. It was about to get much noisier.

A gust of frigid air ushered in her daughter and grandsons, Dustin and Cody. "Hi, Grandma. Where's Noah?"

"In the living room. Take your boots off first."

The boys quickly kicked off their boots and jackets and ran into the other room.

"Hi, Mom." Annie bent to give her a hug.

"Hi, darling. You're brave to venture out in this weather."

"Brave or desperate. Steve is working, and the boys were driving me crazy stuck in the house. I figured they could run around with Noah and hopefully wear themselves out. Your house is a lot bigger than mine. I hope you don't mind."

"The more the merrier. Grab a coffee and tell me what's new with you."

Annie grabbed a mug and took the chair next to her. "Just busy getting ready for Christmas. I've been trying to get my shopping done before the boys get out of school in another week. How about you? What's new here?"

"Not much. Same old stuff. I'm trying to get ready for Christmas, too. I've done quite a bit of baking. Belle grabbed a tin from the counter. "Have a cookie."

"I really don't need one. I swear I always gain ten pounds in December." Annie reached in and grabbed one, anyway.

"That's what you're supposed to do at Christmas time."

Haley joined them, pouring herself another mug.

"Where's my gorgeous niece?"

“I put her down for a nap. She was up at the crack of dawn this morning. Thanks for bringing your boys by to entertain Noah.” She put her feet up on the chair next to her. “I need about ten minutes of peace and quiet.”

The back door opened to Bart, carrying a large thermos. He hesitated as he entered the kitchen. “Sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt—we just need some warm coffee.” He headed toward the large urn.

“Bart, this is my daughter, Annie.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am.” He tipped his hat. “You’re as pretty as your mama.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Annie glanced over at Belle.

Belle felt her face warm as Bart filled the thermos. “I’ll get out of your way.” He hurried out the back door.

Annie smiled. “Mom, you’ve been holding out on me. Who was that handsome silver fox?”

“I’m not holding out on you. His name is Bart Stockton, and he’s helping us out through the holidays while Landon is away visiting his sister.” Why was she nervous? There was nothing going on between her and Bart.

Annie winked at Haley. “What do you think?”

“I think he’s a very nice man. Noah sure likes him. He was kinda scruffy when he arrived, but he’s cleaned himself up nicely. Maybe he’s trying to impress Mom? She is a beautiful woman, after all.”

“Knock it off, you two. I hope you aren’t going to try and fix me up with every cowboy who lands on our ranch.”

Annie chuckled. “Not every one. Just the mature, sexy ones. Come on, admit it. He is attractive.”

“I hadn’t really noticed, but I guess so.”

Annie turned to Haley again. “Are you buying that she hadn’t noticed?”

“Okay, maybe I noticed, but I’m not interested. On top of the fact that he works for me, I’ve buried two husbands. I’m not about to try for a third.”

“They say the third time is a charm,” Haley said. “We want you to be happy.”

“I am happy. I have you kids and four wonderful grandchildren. You’re all I need. I’m a lucky woman.”

Annie reached over and patted her hand. “Of course, you are, Mom,

and we all love you, but if you wanted something more, we'd all understand."

Time to change the subject. "So, when is the children's Christmas program at school? I don't want to miss it." They spent the next hour chatting about the boys and the plans for the Christmas holiday. By the time Annie and her boys left, it was time to think about making lunch. Belle stared out the window as she got out bread and lunchmeats. Was Annie right? Did she want something more? It had been over two years since Larry passed. She had to admit that winter nights could get lonely. Still, she was much too old to start dating again, and the dating pool in their small mountain town was limited. She had a better chance of getting struck by lightning.

Bart was attractive, and he was growing on her day by day, but three weeks from now, he'd be off to who knew where. Starting anything with him would be foolish, and she wasn't a foolish woman. She'd never been the casual-fling type, and that's all it could be. Besides, he probably wasn't even attracted to her in that way. Nope, she'd enjoy him as a friend and that was it. Christmas miracles didn't happen for people her age. She'd had a good life, and her memories were enough.

Chapter Six



Belle finished cleaning the kitchen after dinner. Ryder and family had gone into the living room to watch a Christmas movie, and Bart had retired to the bunkhouse. Why did she feel restless? Was it the conversation she'd had with Annie and Haley? She should go up to her room and read a good book or watch some television, but neither sounded appealing.

Instead, she bundled up in her heaviest down jacket, stocking cap, and mittens and stepped out into the night. It was so cold that her breath felt like it might freeze. She hurried across the lawn to the arena. She'd go in and say hi to her horse, White Cloud. Maybe she'd even ride around the arena to clear her head. She opened a small side door and slipped inside. It was much warmer inside. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. She heard a noise from the other end of the large building. What was that? Was that a shadow of someone moving? Probably just one of the barn cats. There it was again. Was someone in here? Should she be afraid? They were so isolated that it was highly unlikely that any stranger would be here in this cold.

She took a couple of more quiet steps along the edge of the arena. "Hello? Is anyone in here?" she called out.

A shadow emerged from a far stall. She jumped.

"Belle, is that you?" Bart's deep voice rang out. "I'm sorry if I

startled you.”

She let out a deep sigh of relief. “It’s fine. I just didn’t expect anyone to be in here.”

He walked toward her so she could see him clearly. “I didn’t either. I can leave. I came to check on a couple of the horses.”

“No, you can stay. I’d enjoy the company. I came out to see my horse, White Cloud. This is her.” She walked over to the stall.

“She’s very pretty. What breed is she?” he asked, following behind her.

“She’s actually an appaloosa without many spots. I’ve had her for about ten years. She’s the best.”

“So, you like to ride?”

“Of course, I do own a horse ranch. I don’t spend all of my time in the kitchen.”

His face turned pink. “I’m sorry again. I didn’t mean to imply…”

She laughed. “It’s fine. I know that’s where you’ve seen me. When the weather is warmer, I ride almost every day. Not too fast anymore, but there’s still nothing better than being on a horse.”

“I’ll agree with you there. Want me to turn on the overhead lights, so we can ride around the arena?”

“I’d like that.” This was nice—having someone to ride with. She and Gordon had loved to ride after dinner in the evenings. Of course, there’d been no indoor space then, so they’d been limited to nice weather.

She entered the stall and quickly brushed and saddled White Cloud. When she emerged, Bart was already circling the arena on a young bay horse. She got on and joined him “Who’s that?” she asked.

“This is Cricket. I think he’s pretty new to the ranch. Only four, so he needs some work.”

“I hate to say that I don’t know all of our horses anymore. Ryder has really increased our numbers in the past couple of years. Plus, he’s always buying and selling, so I lose track.”

“You’re lucky to have him here with you.”

“Having a son who shares your passions is the best. You said you have a daughter? Is she into horses?”

“Sadly, no. Summer couldn’t wait to turn eighteen and move to the city. Horses were so much a part of the life her mother and I shared. I don’t

know where we went wrong.”

“Everyone needs to be themselves, I guess.”

“You’re right. It wouldn’t matter now, anyway.”

Belle wondered what that meant. Why wasn’t Bart at home on his own ranch? Had something happened other than the death of his wife?

Bart abruptly changed the subject. “It was nice to meet Annie. Does she like city life, too?”

Belle laughed. “If you can call Pine Meadows a city. I think she’s still a ranch girl at heart. She and the boys all have their own horses here and come ride often. Steve, her husband, isn’t as much into horses, but they talk about moving out to a place where they could have a couple when the boys get a little older. Right now, being in town in a neighborhood with other kids works for them.”

“I get that. Can I ask why you do all the cooking instead of being with the horses more?”

“Really? You don’t think I can do both?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s just that Connie, my wife, hated to be in the kitchen. She was in the barn more than I was.”

“How did you eat? Did you cook?”

Bart laughed. “Naw. When we were on the rodeo circuit, we ate out. Later, we moved to her father’s ranch. He’d always had a hired cook, so we were lucky we didn’t have to learn.”

“That’s nice, but no, after horses, cooking is my second passion. I started doing all of the cooking when Gordon and I got married, and I moved here. I love it. I broke my foot two winters ago, so I don’t ride as much as I used to, but I still find time—like right now. It’s all about balance.”

“Did you break your foot riding?”

“No, just walking across the lawn in the ice and snow. Stupid. It was before Ryder moved back. I thank God he came to help me, even if he does try to boss me around.”

“Like with the Christmas lights?”

“Yep. Like that. He means well, but I’m not ancient, yet.”

“You sure aren’t.”

The appreciative look he gave her sent an unaccustomed warmth throughout her body. No one had appreciated her as a woman in quite a while. It made her feel younger than her sixty years.

They rode for about a half hour. “I should get back up to the house. I’m getting a little chilly.” She pulled White Cloud to a stop and dismounted.

Bart rode up beside her. “I can unsaddle her and put her away for you, if you’d like.”

“Thanks, but I’ll do it.” She led White Cloud into her stall. When she came out a few minutes later, Bart was waiting for her in the aisle. They walked to the door together, and he flipped off the lights. “Thanks for riding with me. You made this old man’s night.” Bart reached over and gave her a hug—not a romantic hug, but rather one of those side hugs friends shared—still, it surprised her—in a good way.

“I enjoyed it, too. Goodnight.” She headed toward the house with a smile on her face. She didn’t look back to see if he was still standing there. This night had turned out so much better than she’d expected.



Bart watched her until she was safely in the house before making his way back to the bunkhouse. There was something about Belle. In the weeks and months since Connie passed, he’d barely given a second glance to any member of the opposite sex. He just wasn’t interested. He’d had his one true love, and that was enough. She was his first and his last. He hadn’t thought any other woman could ever compete with her. But with Belle, it was different. He didn’t compare her to Connie; rather he was starting to appreciate her for who she was. And who she was, was someone who stirred a deep longing in his soul.

He shook his head as he entered the bunkhouse and threw some logs into the wood stove. He was only here for another three weeks. Hardly time to get to know her, let alone have anything deeper develop between the two of them. All he needed was someone else to miss when he lay alone on a bunkhouse bed. Besides, he had nothing left to offer her. Everything he’d worked for had been taken away. No woman needed a roaming cowhand in her life. If he was smart, he’d keep his distance from her for the rest of his time at Pine Mountain Ranch. He was here to work with horses—nothing more, nothing less. He’d do his job.

The next morning when he walked into the kitchen and saw Belle

standing by the stove, Bart's resolve disappeared faster than a horse being let out into a green pasture. She was wearing a bright green sweater with a Christmas tree on the front, her hair was loosely pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore jeans that hugged her in all the right places.

"Good mornin'." He walked over and helped himself to coffee. "What's for breakfast?" The aroma coming from the stove made his mouth water.

"Biscuits and gravy. I hope you like it."

"It's one of my favorites." He smiled at her. "Can I help you with anything?"

"Nope. It's almost done. Have a seat."

Bart sat at the table, refusing to admit that he'd purposely come in a little early to have some alone time with Belle.

"Did Ryder tell you about our Sunday schedule?"

"No, I don't think he did."

"Well, it's a little different than the other six days. We tend to take it easy. Instead of having lunch and dinner, we'll have a big Sunday meal at around two or three. After breakfast, we'll be heading into Pine Meadows to church. You're welcome to join us."

"Thanks, but I'll pass. I'm not much of a churchgoer."

"Suit yourself." She busied herself at the stove.

He hoped he hadn't disappointed her. Truth was, he hadn't stepped foot in a church since Connie's funeral. He couldn't hold much stock in a god who would take her well before her time. "I have a couple of horses I want to work with this morning."

She didn't reply. Thankfully, Ryder and his family joined them and put an end to the awkward conversation. When he told Ryder he would not be joining them for church, Ryder asked him to take care of the morning feedings. "After that, feel free to relax. Did Mom tell you about our Sunday meal schedule?"

"She did. Sounds fine to me. Enjoy your time with your family. I'll hold things down here."

He'd already returned to the barn when he heard the family drive away. He let out a deep sigh. The sun was shining brightly this morning and the temperature had risen into the twenties. It would be a nice day to take one of the young horses he was working with out on a trail ride. He could use the

practice. Also, he hadn't ridden outside the arena since he'd arrived. He wanted to explore the area.

After feeding the horses, he saddled up and headed down a path barely visible beneath the snow. He loved the cool, crisp mountain air. His horse shied as a rabbit darted across their path. He patted his neck to calm him. He wound his way slowly, not wanting the young gelding to slip and risk hurting either of them. Once he reached a tree-covered slope, the path wound upward and was shielded from the snow and much clearer. Bart relaxed and enjoyed the ride. A few deer crossed in front of him but ignored him. He climbed his way up to the edge of a ridge and came to a stop. From here, he could look down over the ranch. It was beautiful. Belle was blessed to call this place home. It was even prettier than Eastern Montana where it was less mountainous. Beyond the ranch, stretched a mountain range with snow-covered peaks as far as the eye could see. Some called it God's country, and he could see why. If a God did exist, he liked to think this was where you would find him, not in some stuffy church building. A breeze picked up, and he fastened his coat around his neck to stay warm. Time to head back down. If the snow blew too much, he might lose sight of the path he'd taken.

He took it slow going down so the horse wouldn't slip on the icy ground. That's how his life had felt the past two years—like an icy path that led to nowhere. He lived day to day, making no plans for the future because without Connie he had none. There were times when he hadn't cared whether he woke up the next morning or not, but Belle had started to change all that. He looked forward to her smiling face each morning. It had only been a week, but she'd already made a difference. If he did still believe in God, he would have thought that he ended up at Pine Mountain Ranch for a reason. But he didn't believe in that stuff. It was just a happy coincidence that he'd landed here for the holidays. Still, he could make the best of it while he was here, and if he could also make Belle's life a little brighter, all the better. She deserved to be happy.

Chapter Seven



Belle stepped outside into the falling snow. She had a long list. She needed to pick up their weekly groceries in town, as well as a couple of Christmas presents which had arrived at the post office. She could do it by herself, but it would be easier with another person. She walked down to the arena. Ryder and Bart were both working with horses.

She climbed up on the rail and waved to them. “I’m going into town to run some errands and could use some help. Would either of you be interested?”

Bart spoke up first. “I’d be happy to help you out.” He paused and looked at Ryder. “That is, if you can spare me here.”

“Go ahead. Better you than me. You’ve never been shopping with my mom.” He laughed.

“I’m not that bad.” Belle pretended to pout.

“It’s a matter of opinion. Bart, put your horse in his stall before you go. You two have fun.”

Really, Ryder? Belle knew her son was teasing, but secretly she was glad Bart had volunteered. She liked the idea of spending some more time alone with him—maybe finding out a little more about his life before he landed on their ranch. She waited while he took care of his horse, and they

walked side-by-side to her truck.

“Do you want me to drive?” Bart asked.

“No. I’ve got it.” She didn’t want to appear needy. Still, she appreciated the fact that he hurried to the driver’s side door and opened it for her before going around and getting in himself.

She made her way up the lane and turned onto the road. “So, I know your wife died, but don’t you have any extended family who you want to spend Christmas with?”

Bart stared out the window in silence. Was that too personal of a question?

Finally, he turned to her. “I didn’t have what you’d call a normal childhood. I never knew my dad—don’t even have a name. To tell the truth, I don’t know if my mom even knew who he was for sure. She was what we called a buckle bunny on the rodeo circuit. She followed the rodeo from town to town, hoping to hook up with the cowboys. All summer, for as long as I can remember, we were in a different town every few nights. Sometimes, she’d drag me along and work in concessions to make ends meet. Other times, she’d hook up with a cowboy for a few weeks or months, and he’d support us. Her relationships never lasted long. When I got to school age, we’d stop in some random town for the winter, and she’d get a job, usually waitressing or bartending. I’d be the new kid in school. I never really tried to make friends because I knew the following year, we’d be somewhere different. When I turned eighteen, she told me I was on my own and took off with yet another cowboy. So, to answer your question, if she had family, I never met them and, of course, I have no idea about the other side of my family tree.”

“Is your mom still alive?”

“I don’t know that either. I stayed with rodeo because it was the only life I knew. Some of the older cowboys took me in and taught me to bronc ride. Turns out I was good at it. While I was on the circuit, Mom would show up every once in a while. She usually wanted money. When Connie and I retired and moved to her family’s ranch, I lost touch with dear old mom. That’s that.”

Belle’s heart ached for the small boy who’d never really been loved and appreciated. She’d had such a loving family. She couldn’t imagine what it had been like for him.

“I don’t want pity,” he said. “You asked, so I told you. Christmas never meant much to me as a child. Once in a while, some charitable organization would stop by with gifts. Christmas only gained meaning once I met Connie. She loved holidays and always made them special. Once she was gone, my Christmas spirit went with her.”

Belle was tempted to ask if he wasn’t repeating the same mistakes with his own daughter, but she had no idea what had come between them, so she kept quiet as she pulled up to her first stop. That was a conversation for another time.

Bart had never really enjoyed shopping, but being with Belle made this excursion fun. They walked up and down the aisles of the grocery store and joked about different items. She offered to include anything he wanted to eat, but he let her make the decisions. Honestly, the food she prepared was the best he’d ever eaten.

Next, they stopped at the post office, where he carried a couple of large boxes to the back of her truck, then they went to a ranch supply store and picked up some items for Ryder.

“Would you like to stop for a coffee? The local coffee shop, Pine Perks, makes some excellent Christmas lattes.” Belle smiled.

“I’m not much for fancy drinks, but I’d have another black coffee if you’d like to stop.”

“Okay. Let’s do it.” They walked down the street to the coffee shop. For the middle of the morning, it was amazingly busy. They stood in line behind several others—all of whom Belle knew. When they got to the front of the line, Belle ordered some peppermint Christmasy drink and a Christmas spice muffin, and he ordered a large black coffee.

He pulled out his wallet. “Let me get this.”

“No, you’re helping me out. The least I can do is buy you a coffee.”

“No, I insist.” He handed the barista his card before Belle could protest. He’d always prided himself on being a gentleman. He knew this wasn’t a date, but still, he couldn’t let a pretty woman pay.

Belle smiled at him. “Thank you. Let’s find a table.” She led the way to a small one in the back of the shop. A young girl delivered their order, and Belle pushed the muffin into the middle of the table. “Help yourself.” She broke off a piece and stuck it in her mouth.

He didn't really need a bite, but it felt intimate, sharing something with her, so he took a bite himself. "You're right. It is delicious. Not as good as your cookies though."

"Flattery will get you everywhere." She winked at him.

He'd done way too much talking on the ride down here. He wanted to know more about her. "So, what do you want for Christmas? Anything you're hoping that Santa will bring?"

"Goodness, I don't really need anything. The holiday is about the kids. All I hope for is good health for me and my family. That's all I need at my age. How about you?"

"The same, I guess. Connie and I used to exchange presents, but they were always small things that held more sentimental value than anything else. You'll have to give me a list so I can get some presents for your grandchildren."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know, but you all make me feel like part of the family. If I'm going to spend Christmas with you, I want to get something for the kids."

"I'll make you a list of small things you could pick up." She stared at him.

"What?"

"You're a nice man, Bart Stockton."

He laughed. "Careful. You don't know me that well yet." Secretly, it warmed his heart that she thought so. He hoped that never changed.



"I want to pick the movie!" Noah jumped up from the dinner table and ran into the living room. Haley laughed and stood to follow him. "Do you need help, Mom?"

"No, I've got this. You go enjoy the movie with Noah."

Ryder also stood with Cassidy in his arms. "Thanks for dinner, Mom. You're the best."

Bart spoke up, "Why don't you let me do the dishes and clean up? You can go watch the movie with your family."

Belle stared at him. In all the many years she'd done the cooking at

their ranch, this was the first time one of their cowhands had ever volunteered to do the dishes. “I can’t let you do that. Besides, they need some family time without me. I’m sure Noah will pick one of those Christmas cartoons I’ve seen a million times.” She grabbed the platters from the middle of the table.

“Well, at least let me help you.” He also stood and grabbed some plates.

“Okay.” She would like the company—his company. “I’ll wash—you dry.” She handed him a towel, and in no time, the kitchen sparkled.

He hung up the towel. “If you don’t need anything else, I’ll head down to the bunkhouse.”

Belle hesitated. She didn’t want him to leave. “Would you like a cup of tea? I always make a pot after dinner. Herbal, so it doesn’t keep me awake all night. I have some gingerbread spice.”

“I’d like that.” His smile warmed her heart.

She turned on the pot to heat the water and got out two cups and a small tray. “Will you join me upstairs? It’s more comfortable than in the kitchen.”

“Upstairs?”

Her face warmed. That sounded wrong. Did he think she was inviting him to her bedroom? She realized he’d never been on the second floor of the house. She busied herself so as not to have to look directly at him. “Yeah, when Ryder and Haley got married, I moved from the main part of the second floor to the separate back area, up those stairs, so they could have their privacy. It used to be a maid’s quarters, but it’s very nice. There were two bedrooms, so I turned one into a small living room. I have a TV and a couple comfortable chairs looking out over the ranch. It gives them some privacy and me, as well.”

She filled the ceramic pot with hot water, and he took the tray from her. “Lead the way.”

She started up the narrow, steep staircase, very aware of the sexy man walking a few steps behind her. She’d never had a man up here—never had the chance. She’d shared the main bedrooms on the other side of the house with both of her husbands. She got to the top and was thankful that the door to her bedroom was closed. Had she made her bed this morning? She continued on to the next room and turned on a lamp, then she walked over to a CD player and turned some Christmas music on low. “I love Christmas

carols, don't you?"

"They're okay. This is nice—cozy," he said.

"I like it. You can set the tray on the table." She sat in one of the lounge chairs and motioned for him to take the other. The small coffee table was between them. "I love this view," she said, looking out the large picture window to the Christmas lights outside. In the daytime, you can see the whole Pine Mountain Range." She poured them both a cup of tea and tried to calm her nerves. This seemed intimate. Was she ready for intimate?

Bart stared out the window with her. "You've made a nice home here. I can see why you'd never want to leave this place."

"What about you? Where do you call home? You mentioned you lived for many years on your wife's family's ranch. Is that home for you?"

"Not anymore."

"Did you sell it when she and her father died?"

"Not exactly. It's complicated."

"I'm sorry, I'm being too nosy again. You don't have to tell me."

He sighed and looked at her. "No, I'm just not used to talking about my personal issues. I'm afraid it's not a very interesting story."

"I'd love to hear it, if you want to talk about it."

"Why?" He looked perplexed.

"I don't know. I like to know about my friends. I feel we're becoming friends." Her heart raced.

"I like that idea. Okay. I don't know where to start. Connie's mom died when she was ten. Her dad William 'Bill' raised her and her younger brother, Drake, on his own after that. When she got out of high school, Connie left to become a trick rider, and Drake stayed on the ranch. When we moved back there, Drake was married and had three kids. They had two more soon after that. Drake was one of those guys who gets by on the least amount of work possible. He didn't add much to their horse business.

"When Connie and I moved there, Bill started depending on me to build the business. I knew horses, plus my name was a draw. I was pretty famous in the rodeo world. People came to buy horses from Bart Stockton. Drake always resented me and the close relationship I formed with his dad.

"Over the years, Bill had several serious conversations with me and Connie. He wanted us to take over management of the ranch if something happened to him. Of course, Connie would always provide a place for her

brother and make sure he and his family were taken care of. No one ever anticipated what happened.

“When Bill died, Drake went through his safe and found a will. It was handwritten and old. He’d drafted it shortly after his wife died. It left the ranch equally to Drake and Connie. Drake assumed that meant since Connie had also died, that her share reverted to him. Connie and I had wills from when we were in the rodeo, leaving all we had to the other, so I assumed the ranch would be half mine. I went to see a lawyer I knew, and he said if an attorney had drafted the will, it would have specified if Connie’s share reverted to Drake or came to me. Apparently, many people do it both ways. Neither is right or wrong.

“So, the legal battle began. Drake wasn’t speaking to me, and life at the ranch was miserable. I missed Connie, and I wasn’t up for a fight. That’s where Summer and I butted heads. I wanted to give up and move on. She thought I should stay and fight for what was mine. After all, she’d grown up with that ranch as home. One day, I couldn’t take it any longer. I packed up what I could fit in the back of my pickup and left. The only thing I regret leaving behind is my cutting horse, Banjo. I raised and trained him myself. He was the best horse I’ve ever ridden.”

“Why didn’t you take him?”

“I didn’t know if I could. Technically, he belongs to Flying V Ranch. So did all the horse trailers. Maybe I should have fought for him. I hope he’s being taken care of. Anyway, I drove north and got a job breaking horses on a large ranch. They were thrilled to have me.

“I called my lawyer and told him to let Summer take over and make any decisions in the lawsuit. I don’t even know where it stands now.” He sighed and looked out the window.

Belle waited. When he turned back to her, he said, “Do you think I did the right thing?”

She reached over and touched his hand. “It doesn’t matter what I think. You had to do what was right for you.”

He turned his hand over and squeezed hers. “You’re amazing. Do you know that? Thank you for listening. It feels good to talk about it. I’ve stuffed it inside for almost a year.”

“Anytime. I’ve been told that I’m a good listener.”

“I best get out of your hair and back to the bunkhouse.” He pulled his

hand back and stood. “Thank you for the tea and conversation.”

She stood and followed him to the door. “Goodnight.”

He turned to her, and suddenly his lips were on hers. Lightly—tentatively. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. It felt right. He deepened the kiss, and she let go and let herself just feel the moment.

All too soon, he pulled back. “Goodnight,” he whispered, and then he disappeared down the staircase.

Her heart raced as she heard the back door close. She walked back over to the window and watched him cross the lawn toward the bunkhouse.

She ran her finger over her lips. That was a pleasant surprise. She was falling for Bart and falling hard.

Chapter Eight



Bart laced his fingers behind his head and stared up at the pine ceiling of the bunkhouse. What had he done? He hadn't meant to kiss her. That was a lie. He'd wanted to kiss her since that first day he laid eyes on her. Trouble was, he knew better. Not only was she his boss, but he would be walking out of her life in a few short weeks. There wasn't time to start a relationship.

And worse than that, if he could stay in her life, he had nothing to offer her. He'd walked away from everything. She was a ranch owner, and he was an itinerant cowboy with not much more to his name than the clothes on his back. He wouldn't take advantage of her. She didn't deserve that. The fact that they shared a mutual attraction wasn't enough to overcome their differences. No matter how strong the attraction was, this was wrong. Then why had it felt so right? Since Connie's death, he hadn't once had the urge to get close to another woman, but with Belle...let's just say his body had reacted in ways he thought were long dead. Her lips were so soft—kissable. He wanted to do it again and again, and then? What would it feel like to hold her body next to his and make love to her all night long? His body reacted at the thought. He shook his head.

He had always prided himself on his self-control. Even when he was young and foolish, he'd not given into emotions. He had to exercise that control now. If he kept kissing her, he'd lose it and go farther than was good for either of them.

And what would Ryder think if he knew? He'd probably fire him right on the spot, and he'd be back on the road for Christmas. That wasn't a pleasant thought. He wanted to stay here until the first of the year as agreed upon. He needed to put her back in the friend zone. God, he loved talking to Belle. He could tell her anything without the risk of judgment. That was the sign of a true friend. Those had been few and far between in his life.

Christmas would be here in less than two weeks. What could he get for Belle? It needed to be something special. Something that a beautiful lady deserved. But what? She appeared to have everything she needed. If he asked her, she'd tell him just to get presents for the kids. That wouldn't do. If he had to walk out of her life, he wanted her to feel special this Christmas. He wracked his brain. That's when he thought of Tommy Windwalker. Tommy was a native American artist who'd followed the rodeo circuit, painting pictures of cowboys in action. There were several ones of Bart on the back of a bucking bronc hanging in various Western art galleries. Over the years they'd become friends.

He pulled out his phone and hit Tommy's number. The last he'd heard, Tommy was semi-retired and living in Bozeman. It only rang once.

"Bart Stockton. How are you, man?"

"Good. You?"

"Living the dream. Got a nice home here in Bozeman with a great view of the Pine Range. Got hitched a few years back. Still painting when I get the urge. Are you still on the ranch out east? I was so sorry to hear about Connie. She was one of the best."

"Thanks, man. It was rough. She died way too soon. I needed a change of scenery, so I'm actually working on a ranch west of Butte right now. That's why I'm calling. The lady who owns this place is special. I was wondering if I could pay you to do a painting for her?"

"What kind of painting were you thinking?"

"Maybe a landscape with her ranch house in the background. It's a beautiful place." Suddenly, he had an idea. "It's all lit up with Christmas lights right now. Do you think you could paint that?"

“Don’t see why not. Why don’t you take a picture of the view you’d like and send it to me? When do you need this painting?”

Bart cringed and hesitated. “Christmas? I know that’s short notice.”

“I might be able to make that happen as long as it doesn’t have to be too large.”

“Fantastic. I’ll get you the picture tonight. When it’s done, I’ll drive over to Bozeman and pick it up. You’re the best. I owe you one.”

Tommy laughed. “As I remember you owe me several, but who’s counting? I’ll be in touch. And Bart, it’s great to hear from you. Those rodeo days sure were fun.”

“That they were.”

Bart hung up and smiled before pulling on his boots and jacket and stepping back out into the cold night. He walked around the barn to the edge of the lawn, pulled out his phone, and snapped several pictures of the house all lit up. He glanced up at the second-story windows. He now knew which one was her bedroom. There was still a light on. Was she thinking about him and their kiss? Despite all his reservations, he hoped that she was.



After Belle watched Bart disappear behind the barn, she sat down at her desk and turned on her computer. Curiosity got the better of her. She typed “Bart Stockton” into the search bar. Not surprisingly, many results immediately appeared on her screen. She clicked through pages and pages of a younger version of Bart on the backs of bucking broncos. Then, she found some close-ups of him accepting various trophies, belt buckles, and awards. Younger Bart was so handsome—not that he wasn’t handsome now. She even watched a few videos of his rides. She was glad she hadn’t known him then. It was terrifying.

Next, she found shots of him and Connie. She was gorgeous. What had Belle expected? Of course, a famous trick rider and wife of a top cowboy would be gorgeous. And those tricks she did. Belle had always prided herself on being an excellent horsewoman, but this was in a whole other league. What was that pang she felt? Jealousy? Of his dead wife? She shook her head. Of course, he’d had a life before he met her a week ago—she’d had

one, too. She could still feel his lips on hers, hungry with a passion she hadn't felt in years. It had never been that way with Larry. Their marriage was more of a friendship. She'd loved him in her own way, but it had never been like it had been with Gordon. No sparks had ever flown. But with Bart, let's just say sparks had started to simmer. With enough time, those sparks could burst into flames. Had he felt it, too? Her heart beat faster.

She typed in a new search for Flying V Ranch and found a website. It was a sprawling ranch. Not as mountainous as western Montana, but still beautiful. One of the first things she noticed was that Drake Vance was listed as the sole owner of the property. She clicked on a page titled "Current horses for sale" and began to scroll through the photos. They were all beautiful animals and pricey, too. She'd almost made it to the end of listings when one caught her eye—Banjo. Was that Bart's horse? Did he know he was for sale?

She closed the computer and got ready for bed. She couldn't get that picture out of her head. His brother-in-law was selling his horse? How sad. She knew how much a cowboy's horse meant to him.

She stared out the window at the lights on a large pine tree, that kiss still on her mind. How had Bart come to mean so much to her in such a short period of time? She knew he was leaving after the holidays, but she wanted more than anything to give him a good Christmas. She wanted him to feel the warmth her family shared and maybe even the warmth of her love. Something he could carry with him and make his world not so dark. She would find a way to do that. He'd come into their lives for a reason—she believed that. The least she could do was make him feel at home. Maybe even steal a few more kisses. She'd like that even if it couldn't last.

Belle got up extra early the next morning. She quickly dressed and made her way down the dark stairs. There was something about her kitchen in the early morning, before anyone else was awake, that she liked. It gave her a sense of peace. She started the coffee urn and turned on the oven. She was making biscuits this morning. She looked out the frosted window into the early morning sky filled with stars. It was going to be a sunny day.

An old floorboard in the living room squeaked. She turned as Ryder walked into the kitchen. "You're up early," he said.

"I'm always up early. What are you doing up?"

"Got up to feed Cassidy a while ago. She went back to sleep, so I came in search of coffee."

“You’re in luck. I already started the urn. Have a seat, and I’ll pour you a mug. There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

Ryder took a seat, and she joined him.

“What’s on your mind, Mom? Another Christmas surprise for my kids?”

“Not exactly. Are you still planning on making that trip out east of Billings to look at some horses?”

“Yeah, if I can squeeze it in this week. Why? Did you need me to do something here?”

“No. It’s not that. I was just wondering if you could look at another horse while you’re in that part of the state.”

“Another horse?” Ryder looked confused.

“Yeah. When Bart left the ranch where he’d spent the last thirty years, he had to leave his horse, Banjo. Now, the owner, his brother-in-law, is trying to sell him. I’d like to buy him and bring him back here to give to Bart for Christmas.”

“How do you know all this? Did Bart ask you to do this?”

“No. He didn’t ask me to do anything. He told me the story of the problems he and his brother-in-law had after his wife and her father died. I looked up the ranch, The Flying V, on the internet and saw that Banjo was for sale.”

“Don’t you think we should stay out of this?”

“No, I don’t. It’s Christmas. Bart’s all alone in the world. It’s the least we can do.”

“Tell me about this horse.”

“He’s a six-year-old quarter horse trained as a cutting horse.” She stated the price she’d read on the internet.

Ryder whistled. “Mom, that’s an expensive horse. I don’t know if we can afford that. Can’t you just get him a nice sweater or something?”

“Nope. I want to get the horse. If the ranch can’t afford it, I’ll pay with my own money. Or we could buy him for our ranch and maybe let Bart pay us over time.”

“He’s leaving in three weeks, remember?”

“I was thinking maybe we could keep him on.”

“And do what? Fire Landon? We don’t need two cowboys over the winter.”

“No, of course not. I just thought there might be a way.”

Ryder took a large swig of his coffee and stared at her. “Mom, I know how you like to take in strays, but this seems extreme even for you. Is there something going on between the two of you that I should know about? I won’t let him take advantage of you.”

Belle glared at her son. “We’re becoming friends, that’s all. No one is taking advantage of me. Give me some credit. I just want to do something nice for the holidays. Is that wrong?”

“No, Mom, it isn’t. I just don’t want to see you hurt. Tell you what, you give me all of the information on the horse, and if it’s not too far from where I’m going, I might swing by and take a look. I guarantee you that I’m not about to pay the price you mentioned, but if this brother-in-law is willing to negotiate, we might be able to work something out.”

Belle got up and walked around the table to give her son a hug. “Thank you. I appreciate it. After all, you yourself said that Bart is great with horses.”

“He is, Mom, but that doesn’t mean we can afford him. I’ll see what I can do about the horse but watch yourself. I know how easily Larry wormed his way into your life.” Ryder frowned.

And there it was. Ryder had never liked Larry and resented him every day he was on the ranch. How did she convince him this was different? “I know you weren’t a fan of Larry, but he made me happy. That should have been enough for you.”

Ryder frowned. “It wasn’t, and he almost ran this place into the ground. You’ve put me in charge now, and I won’t let it happen again. Now, I need to go and wake up Noah for his last day of school.”

He headed for the kitchen door and paused and turned around. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, and I’d never do anything to hurt this family.” She watched him head up the large staircase.

Was Ryder right? Was what she wanted to do too grand of a gesture for someone she’d only known a couple of weeks? She didn’t think so. He’d kissed her with such tenderness and compassion. She knew he was a good man. A good man who had been dealt a lousy hand. She’d give him a Christmas to remember, and after that, she’d have to pray that things would work out as they should.

Chapter Nine



The next morning, when they were all seated at breakfast, Ryder announced that he'd be gone for a couple of days, looking at horses. It was clear that he'd discussed the trip with Haley and gotten her approval.

"But, Daddy, I don't want you to leave," Noah whined. "I want to help you with the horses now that I'm on Christmas break."

"Don't worry, we'll have plenty of time together once I get back."

Noah frowned.

"You can help me with the horses," Bart said.

"Really?" Noah's face brightened.

"Of course. A real cowboy like yourself is just what I need while your dad is away. That is, if it's alright with your mom."

"Can I, Mom? Can I help Bart with the horses?"

"Of course. As long as you don't get in his way and do what he tells you to do."

"I promise."

"It's settled then." Haley smiled at Bart and mouthed the word thanks.

"I'm going to go put on my boots." Noah jumped up from the table.

Ryder turned to Bart. "You alright with holding things down here while I'm gone? I got a lead on a couple of horses that I don't want to pass

up.”

“No problem.”

Haley turned to him. “Don’t feel like you have to watch Noah all day. If he gets in the way, send him up to the house. He can be a bit much sometimes.”

Bart smiled. “I enjoy the little guy. We’ll be fine. I’m heading to the barn. Send him down whenever.” He got up, grabbed his Stetson, and tipped the brim at Belle.

She smiled. He kept worming his way more and more into her heart. Once Bart left, Ryder turned to her. “Are you okay with me being gone for a couple of days, Mom? I know it’s close to Christmas.”

“Of course. Just be careful. The roads may be icy. And about that horse we discussed?”

“What horse?” Haley asked.

“Mom found a horse she wants me to check out. I will if I have time.”

It was all she could ask. Apparently, he hadn’t shared her crazy scheme with Haley.

“Well, I best get packed and on the road. The sooner I leave, the sooner I’ll get back.” He leaned over, and kissed Haley and Cassidy. “Take care of your momma while I’m gone.” Cassidy smiled as though she understood. Noah ran back into the room, and Ryder gave him a big hug. “Be good while I’m gone. Remember Santa is watching.”

“I remember, Dad.”

As soon as Ryder left, Noah ran into the mudroom and started to put on his jacket. Belle smiled and turned to Haley. “You stay inside with Cassidy. I’ll walk him down to the arena.”

“Are you sure, Mom? I can take him.”

“Positive. I can use some fresh air.”

Noah piped up. “I can go there by myself.”

“I know you can, but I want to come with you. You know the rules.” Although the six-year-old could find his way around the ranch alone, they always made sure an adult was with him. If he wandered even a little, it would be easy to get lost in the mountains, and there were occasional sightings of bears and mountain lions. It might be over-protective, but better safe than sorry.

“Okay, but hurry.”

Belle pulled on her boots and down jacket and hurried after Noah. To tell the truth, any excuse to spend more time with Bart became more appealing each day. When she pushed open the heavy door for Noah, Bart had already saddled two horses, including Tornado for Noah. He looked at them and smiled. The feel of his lips on hers flashed through her mind.

Noah ran over and put his arms around his horse's neck. "Good morning, Tornado." The horse nudged him.

Bart walked over to him. "Ready to ride, cowboy?"

"Yep."

"Want a leg up?"

"No, I can do it." Noah led Tornado to the mounting block and climbed on.

Bart was handsome in his felt Stetson and thick suede jacket. He looked like he could be on the cover of some Western magazine. Come to think of it, he probably was on the cover of several back in his rodeo days. He walked toward her.

"If Noah gets in the way, please feel free to bring him back up to the house."

"We'll be fine, won't we, cowboy?"

Noah beamed. "Yep. Come on, Bart."

"Duty calls." He reached out his hand and trailed it down her back before walking to his horse.

Tingles ran up her spine. He'd barely touched her, and he'd set off bells and whistles. "Okay, have fun. Noah, listen to Mr. Stockton." She headed back to the house.

Belle had barely finished the breakfast dishes when the door opened to Annie and her boys. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetie. I didn't know you were coming." Belle hugged her daughter.

"I didn't either, but Steve is out of town and the boys were going stir-crazy. Thought I'd let them run off some of their energy here."

"Where's Noah?" Dustin asked.

"He's out in the arena riding with Bart."

"I want to ride," Dustin said, echoed by Cody.

"I don't know if Bart can handle all three of you. Uncle Ryder is out of town."

“Pleeeeeease?” Cody whined.

“We can walk down to the arena and see.” It seemed like a lot to ask of Bart.

“You stay here, Mom. I’ll go ask him. Come on, boys.” Annie took her boys by the hand.

Belle hesitated. She guessed that would be alright. She didn’t want to impose on Bart. “I made a fresh pot of coffee. Come back up when you get done.”

“I will.” They headed out the back door.

“Did I hear Annie and the boys?” Haley asked, walking into the room.

“Yep. She took them down to the arena. Let’s go sit in the living room.”

Ten minutes later, the back door opened and shut, and Annie joined them with a coffee mug in her hand. “That Bart is the nicest man. He seemed to have no problem riding herd over three small boys.” She looked at Belle. “How’s that going?”

Belle’s face warmed. “How’s what going? If you mean Mr. Stockton, as you said, he’s doing a good job. He really knows horses.”

“I wasn’t asking how he is as a cowhand. How’s it going between the two of you?”

Belle cleared her throat. “We’re friends.”

“Friends, huh?” Annie looked at Haley. “What do you think?”

“I think they enjoy each other’s company.”

“Hey, enjoying someone’s company isn’t a crime. It’s nice to have someone my age around here,” Belle added.

“I didn’t say there was anything wrong with it. If you’re friends with benefits, that’s okay, too.”

Belle’s face warmed again. “We’re not friends with benefits for heaven’s sake. I barely know him. And he’s leaving at the first of the year. Anything more than friendship would be foolish.”

“Well, it’s the holidays, and if you want to be foolish, it’s fine with us. Right, Haley?”

“Right.”

Belle shook her head. She didn’t mind being teased, but how had these two zeroed in on her feelings for Bart? Was she being too transparent? She thought she’d done a good job of hiding how she felt when others were

around. "As far as I'm concerned, he's here for the holidays, so we treat him like family."

Annie dropped it and turned to Haley. "So, where's my brother?"

"He's out looking at horses for a couple of days."

"Men. Don't they understand how much there is to do to get ready for Christmas? I told Steve he has to be in town all next week."

"Yeah, I told Ryder the same thing. That's why he went now. Let's talk about the menu for Christmas dinner."

Belle was thankful for the change of subject. They spent the next half hour discussing who would cook what parts of the Christmas meal. By the time they'd finished, it was almost time for lunch. She got out some fixings for sandwiches and rang the dinner bell. All three boys came running into the house followed by Bart who looked no worse for wear.

"How was riding?" Annie asked.

"Awesome," Dustin said. "We played tag, and Mr. Bart taught us some new tricks to teach our horses."

Belle looked at their smiling faces and turned to Bart. "Thank you so much."

"No problem. These little cowboys can hang out with me anytime." Bart made a sandwich and sat down next to the boys.

"How about this afternoon?" Cody asked.

Annie laughed. "Sorry, no more riding today. We have things to do at home after you eat."

"Aww, Mom," Dustin whined. "Can Noah come with us?"

"Sure. If it's alright with his mom, he can spend the night."

"Can I, Mom?"

If you finished your chores, I don't see why not."

The boys rushed through their food and ran upstairs to get Noah's things, which left Bart alone with the three women. Suddenly, his nerves kicked in. Why were Haley and Annie looking at him that way? Had Belle told them about the kiss they'd shared? It didn't seem like something she'd do. He was being paranoid. Still, he finished his sandwich and stood. "I best be getting back to work. Good to see you again, Annie."

"You, too. Thanks again for entertaining the boys."

"Just doing my job, ma'am." He tipped his hat and escaped out the

back door. They didn't need to keep thanking him. He enjoyed kids—always had. He thought back to the days at The Flying V when Summer had been that age along with Drake's kids. He'd never minded having them underfoot. All too quickly, they'd grown and gone. He'd like being a grandpa, but Summer wasn't even dating. Well, actually, he didn't know that. A lot could have changed in the past year. A pang of guilt ran through him. He should have kept in better touch.

And Drake's kids. As much as their father had annoyed him, it wasn't their fault. There was a time when he and Connie were really close to all three boys and two girls. The youngest would have graduated from high school last spring while he was away. Heck, for all he knew, one of them could be engaged or married by now. Connie wouldn't be happy knowing that he'd walked out on them. He sighed. Had he put himself above everyone else in his life? They all missed Connie, too.

He walked into the arena and saddled another young horse for an afternoon workout. He got on and kicked him into a fast canter. Round and round they went until the horse wore out, and Bart got control of his emotions. He couldn't change the past or his role in everything that had transpired since Connie died, but maybe he could change the future.

Belle believed in him—trusted him. No one had ever really done that except for Connie and Bill Vance. When they died, he didn't think anyone ever would again. Belle had changed all that. He would be forever grateful to her. Maybe there was a god, and he'd brought him to Pine Mountain Ranch for a reason.

He patted the horse on the neck as they walked around the arena to cool down. "You're a good boy." Horses were easier to understand than people, but he'd put more effort into the latter. He didn't want to die alone.

Chapter Ten



Bart stood and threw another log on the fire. Since Ryder was away, he'd joined Belle and Haley in the living room for a cup of tea after dinner. It was unusually quiet with Noah not around. Cassidy started to fuss in her baby seat.

"That's my cue to give her a bath and put her to bed. I think I'll take advantage of my boys being gone and read a good book once she falls asleep. Goodnight, you two." Haley stood and picked up the seat, swinging it in her arms.

"Goodnight," Belle said.

Bart stirred the fire as the sap on the pine logs crackled and popped. Belle sat at one end of the long, leather sofa. He'd been sitting in a chair across from her, but after he closed the screen to prevent embers from popping into the room, he took a seat on the other end of the couch. He had to admit that all day he'd been looking forward to some alone time with her.

"Thanks for letting me hang out with you and Haley tonight. It can get lonely in the bunkhouse."

"You know you're always welcome. I told you that everyone on this ranch is family. Besides, I like your company."

His heart beat faster. He liked her company, too—a lot. "You've

definitely made me feel at home. He leaned back on the pillows and stretched out his legs.

“I know it’s my house, but you make me feel comfortable, too.” She scooted over next to him and laid her head against his shoulder.

He reached out his arm and pulled her closer to him. “This is nice.” He caressed her arm with his fingers as they both stared into the fire. He could do this all night. After a few minutes, Belle turned her head to look at him. Her face was only inches from his own.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked.

“Nothing. This.” She leaned in and gently touched his lips with hers.

“Belle, I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

She responded by touching his lips with her finger. Her arms wound around his neck, and she kissed him again—this time with more passion.

He moaned as his body reacted. He put his other arm under her legs and pulled her into his lap as he encircled her in his arms. His mouth was on hers, pushing her lips open to tangle his tongue with hers. She moaned and pressed into him. He lost himself in sensations. Nothing mattered except the feel of her. As her lips caressed his, he ran his hands up and down her back, then under the bottom of her sweater to feel her warm, soft skin below.

Instead of stopping him, she took her own arms and pulled his shirt out of the waist of his jeans and ran her fingernails down his back. His body was about to explode. He moaned and leaned back farther into the pillows, pulling her on top of him, his hands holding her tight against his throbbing body as she wiggled against him. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He could take her right now. All he wanted was to be inside of her.

Then his brain kicked in. Belle wasn’t a one-night-stand kind of a girl. For that matter, he wasn’t a one-night-stand kind of a guy. He’d never been with anyone other than Connie. As much as he wanted Belle, it couldn’t happen this way.

It took every piece of his willpower to move his hands and gently push back from her. “Belle, I can’t.”

She rolled over slightly and looked into his eyes. “Because you’re still in love with your wife?” Tears formed in her eyes.

“No, it’s not that. I want to be with you. I do. With every ounce of my being. But not like this. Don’t you see that I have nothing to offer you?”

“I’m not asking for anything.”

“I know you’re not, but this can’t happen. I’ve only ever been with one woman, and I was in love with her.”

Belle fought back tears. He didn’t want her. She’d been foolish. “I see.”

“No, you don’t see. I want you—I really do, but I won’t take advantage of you. Maybe someday, this could work. I don’t know. I never should have let it go this far.”

Belle sat back and wiped her eyes. “You’re not forcing me to do anything.”

“I know, darling.” He reached over and rubbed her cheek with his finger. “Don’t think this has anything to do with you not being attractive. You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever met. I just wouldn’t feel right about taking this any further.”

Belle didn’t know what to say. Most likely he was being a gentleman. She should value that, but right now, with her emotions swirling inside, all it felt like was rejection.

Bart straightened his shirt and got up from the couch. “I need to go. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“You know where to find me.” She couldn’t even make herself get up and walk him to the door. He knew the way out. The way out of having any kind of meaningful relationship with her. She sat and watched him disappear into the kitchen and heard the door close behind him.

She’d been wrong about the two of them. Was she really so lonely that she was grasping at any age-appropriate man who came along? She didn’t need a man in her life. A few weeks ago, she would have told you that her life was perfect. But that was before Bart came along and gave her hope—a hope for more. A hope for something she’d given up ever finding again. She stared into the dying flames in the hearth and sighed. Maybe he was right. It was better this way. In two weeks, he’d be gone, and life would go back to normal. The holiday season always made her emotional. It was the time of the year she missed Gordon the most. They’d made a big deal of getting each other special presents. He always knew the right thing to warm her heart.

She wondered how Ryder’s trip was going. Would he come home with Banjo? Surely, that would let Bart know how much she cared. Maybe

this wasn't the end but only a bump in the road. She had another two weeks to show him why they should be together, and she intended to make the most of the time.

The next morning, Haley, with Cassidy in her arms, joined Belle in the kitchen earlier than usual.

"You're up early."

"Yeah, I don't sleep soundly when Ryder is gone, and this one woke up at five. I think she's teething."

Haley grabbed a coffee and made a fresh bottle for Cassidy. Juggling the squirming baby in her lap with one arm, she sipped her coffee with the other.

"Do you want me to hold her?" Belle asked.

"No, I'm good. Finish what you're doing."

"I hope you know what an amazing mother you are." Belle smiled.

"Thanks, but I don't feel very amazing right now."

"I know it's hard when they're little, but it gets easier, I promise. Get some food. The eggs are done." Belle stepped out onto the porch into the freezing cold to ring the bell. It seemed almost silly to ring it just for Bart. He knew when breakfast was, but it was habit. She walked back into the kitchen.

"How did it go?" Haley asked.

"How did what go?"

You know. You and Bart after I went to bed."

Belle sighed. "It didn't. I think he's still in love with his late wife. He said the timing was wrong."

"I'm sorry, but I've seen the way he looks at you. He's smitten."

Belle laughed. "Smitten? Who uses that word? And I don't think he is."

"Give it time."

"One thing we don't have is time."

The back door squeaked open, and she abruptly ended the conversation.

"Mornin'," Bart said, not looking at either of them directly.

"There's eggs on the stove."

Bart loaded his plate and sat down at the table. It felt awkward. He looked down and concentrated on his food. Cassidy wiggled her body, let out a scream, and flung her hand into Haley's arm, which caused her coffee to

spill down Haley's side and onto the floor. Haley looked like she was about to cry. Belle jumped up to grab a towel.

Bart also jumped to his feet and reached out for the baby. "Here, let me hold her while you eat."

"You don't have to do that. She's fussy this morning," Haley replied.

"No problem. I can handle it."

Haley handed the screaming child to him. He took her and started walking back and forth across the kitchen, talking softly to her as he went. To Belle's amazement, Cassidy quieted down and reached out to grab the edge of his shirt.

"That's better. Let's let Mommy eat in peace." He continued his walk.

Haley took the time to gobble down her eggs and finish off a new cup of coffee before taking Cassidy back. "I don't know how to thank you. It's tough being a parent when Ryder is away."

"No thanks needed." Bart sat back down to his food.

"Let me warm that up for you," Belle offered.

"No need. It's fine." He quickly finished and stood. "Lots of work to get done by myself today. You ladies have a good one." Then he was off.

Haley looked at her. "He's such a sweet man."

That was the problem. He was a sweet man. If he was a jerk, this would be a lot easier. He'd barely spoken a word to her. She needed to find a time to talk to him and make things right.



Ryder smiled as he loaded the two horses he'd come for, into the trailer. The drive had been easy, and he'd worked out a deal for the horses yesterday. This morning, he'd come back with a check, and they were ready to go to their new home. Last evening, he'd called Flying V Ranch from his motel room and made arrangements to stop by to look at their horses this afternoon. Was he really helping Mom with her crazy scheme? He looked at a map, and he could be there in less than two hours. So, instead of heading west toward home, he turned northeast. Mom didn't ask him for much. It was the least he could do.

Soon, he turned into The Flying V. An impressive spread sprawled

out in front of him with acres of pastures. As he proceeded, the ranch buildings came into view. There were at least three large homes and many barns and outbuildings beyond. This was quite the operation. No wonder Bart knew so much about horses. He drove up to the nearest barn and parked. It felt good to get out and stretch his legs. He walked into the first barn. A man, with his back to him was grooming a horse.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Drake Vance.”

“You’ve found him. Are you the guy who called last night?”

“That would be me. Ryder Brooks.” He reached out and shook his hand.

“Nice to meet you. You said you’re looking for a cutting horse?”

“Yes, sir. I noticed a horse named Banjo on your website. Can I look at him?”

“You sure can. I have a couple others, that I can show you, too. Follow me.” Drake led the way to another barn with an arena.

Drake showed him three horses, one of which was Banjo. They were all impressive animals. “All these horses were bred and trained by Bart Stockton and Connie Vance, the famous rodeo stars.”

Ryder feigned innocence. “So, do they own part of this operation? I only saw your name on the website.”

Drake frowned. “Not anymore. Unfortunately, my sister, Connie, passed away, and Bart is now working elsewhere.” He quickly changed the subject. “Would you like to ride them?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

As Drake saddled the horses, Ryder looked around the barn. Although it was an impressive facility, it looked like it was in need of some repairs and a new coat of paint. Despite Drake’s bravado, Ryder suspected he was in over his head. He rode all three horses and pretended to consider them all. The fact was, however, even if he wasn’t on a mission, Banjo far outshone the others.

“What do you think?” Drake asked as Bart handed him the reins to the last horse.

“Banjo seems to be what I’m looking for. Let’s talk price.”

Less than an hour later, Ryder had negotiated a price and loaded Banjo in the large trailer with the other two horses. Time to head home to his family. He missed them and couldn’t wait to get home.



All day, Belle had busied herself in the house. A hundred times she almost put on her jacket and went down to the arena to talk to Bart, but each time, she resisted. If she pushed him, she might lose him forever. She needed to give him some space. Dinner had been less awkward, due in part to Noah being back and talking non-stop throughout the meal. He told them everything he'd done with his cousins and everything he was going to do for the rest of Christmas break. When Haley took the kids into the living room, Bart stood up to leave.

Her eyes searched his. "Stay. I'll make some tea."

"Okay." He sat back down.

Leaving the dishes in the sink for later, she poured two cups and sat at the table across from him. "Listen, I'm sorry if I pushed you into something you weren't ready for."

"Belle, no. That's just it—you didn't push me into anything. It was me pushing you."

She started to speak, but he held up his hand to quiet her. "I like you—a lot. Maybe too much. What happened between us, I wanted that. It's just not the right time. I don't want to rush into anything either of us will regret. We have time." He reached across the table and took her hand in his.

But did they have time? What would happen when the next two weeks ended, and he no longer worked for them? The clock was ticking. Where would he go next? Would he walk out of her life?

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

Belle hesitated. Did she trust him? She'd thought she did, but now she was unsure. Would it be foolish to trust a man she'd known such a short time? Her heart said yes, but her head said no. "I'd like to."

Bart sighed and laced his fingers with hers. "Fair. I hope some day I can make you sure about it. You have a nice night. I'll be dreaming about you." He stood and walked toward the door.

"Bart?"

"Yes?"

“I’ll dream about you, too.” She watched him walk away.

Belle finished the dishes and made her way up to her sitting room. She curled up in her big chair and opened the Christmas novel she’d been reading. She tried to read about ten pages before giving up. Her mind wasn’t in it. Her phone rang, and she smiled to see Ryder’s name.

“Hi. How’s the trip going?”

“Good. I head home tomorrow. I should be back by late afternoon. Everything okay there?”

“Yep. All’s good.”

“I have good news. I have Banjo.”

Her heart soared. “Really? Thank you.”

“He’s a great horse, and it turned out Bart’s brother-in-law was willing to sell him for a lot less than advertised. Anyway, that brings me to the reason for my call. I know you wanted Banjo to be a Christmas present for Bart, so what do you want me to do with him when I get back? Do you want to give him to him early? Obviously, if I bring him to our ranch, Bart will see him.”

She hadn’t even thought of that. She wanted Banjo to be a Christmas surprise. “You’re right. Let me try and find somewhere we can keep him for a couple of days. Can I get back to you?”

“Yeah, I’ll be on the road all day tomorrow so let me know before I get there. If I don’t answer, I’m somewhere out of cell range so try back.”

“I will. Thanks. Drive safe. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom.

Belle hung up. She had the perfect Christmas present for the man she was falling for. She hoped and prayed he’d be happy. Now, all she had to do was find somewhere to stash a thousand pound animal for a few days.

Chapter Eleven



As soon as breakfast was over, Belle hopped in her truck and drove straight to Pine Meadows Resort which was only a few miles from the ranch. She parked and walked into the lobby of the beautiful, old, log building. A huge Christmas tree adorned the middle of the large lobby, and several guests were seated in front of a roaring fire. She walked over to the reception desk.

“Hi, Josie. Is Wendy around?”

“Good to see you, Belle. It’s been a while, and yes, she’s in her office. You know where it is, right?”

“Yep.” Belle and the resort’s manager, Wendy, had been friends for years. She headed down the long hallway to the left of the desk. She smiled at the strands of holiday lights brightening the way. She waved to Cheyenne, the assistant manager, as she passed her office.

Wendy looked up as Belle entered her office. “This is a nice surprise. Come in. Would you like some coffee?”

“That would be great. Black.” She sat down in one of the chairs in front of Wendy’s desk.

Wendy poured them both a cup and handed one to her before returning to her seat. “How have you been? Are you ready for Christmas?”

“I’ve been great, and busy. It’s such a crazy time of year, and with the

new baby, I have one more grandchild to buy presents for this year. How about you? How's the new house?" Wendy had recently gotten married, and they'd built a beautiful new home not far from the resort.

"It's wonderful. I've had so much fun decorating it. You should stop by. And Bryce, well, let's just say, he's the best husband ever." She beamed.

"I'm happy for you."

"So, what brings you down here today? Not that you can't just drop by to say hello."

"I have a huge favor to ask. It's a long story, but we have a new cowboy, Bart Stockton, working at our ranch who's been separated from his horse, Banjo, for too long. Anyway, Ryder was able to pick him up, and I want to surprise Bart with him on Christmas. Ryder will be back later today so I was wondering if you might have a spare stall in your barn where we can stash him until Christmas Eve."

"I don't see why not. There's only a couple of horses in there this time of year since we don't do rides in the winter months."

"I'd be happy to pay you and come over every day to feed him and cleanout the stall."

"That's not necessary. We have staff guys to take care of it. Consider it my Christmas present to you."

"Thank you, Wendy."

"Anytime. We've been friends for a lot of years. And since we have been, I know you pretty well, so tell me about this Bart. He must be special for you to go to all of this trouble."

Belle almost said he was just another employee, but Wendy knew her too well for that. Besides, Wendy always had good advice. Belle had valued her opinion many times over the years. She sipped her coffee. "He is special. We've become...friends."

"Just friends? Is he handsome?" Wendy smiled.

"Okay, maybe a little more than friends, or at least I thought so, but he pulled back. And yes, he's handsome. His wife died about two years ago. I'm not sure he's over her. Something is holding him back. They lived on her family's ranch in east Montana. That's where Ryder went to get Banjo. Anyway, there was some kind of falling out between him and his brother-in-law after his wife died, so he left and has been working as a cowhand ever since."

“Well, you, of all people, would know what it’s like to lose a spouse since you’ve buried two of them. Give him some time.”

“That’s the problem. We only hired him for the holidays while Landon is visiting family. Landon will be back the first of the year. So, I don’t have much time to get to know Bart.” Belle sighed. “Hopefully, Banjo will bring him some peace.”

“I’ll be thinking about you. Things usually work out the way they are supposed to. Tell Ryder to drop off Banjo when he gets back. I’ll have one of the guys get a stall ready.”

“Thanks, Wendy. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything but do stop by and see the house.” Wendy stood and walked her into the lobby and gave her a hug. “Merry Christmas, my friend. I hope Santa brings you everything you want.”

Belle hurried back to her truck. She hoped she was doing the right thing. She got in and hit Ryder’s number.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetheart. It’s all set. You can drop Banjo off at Pine Meadows Resort on your way home. How’s the drive going?”

“Good. I should be home in time for dinner. See you soon.”

Belle turned toward home. If nothing else, she’d arranged for some Christmas magic. Everyone deserved some of that.



The sun was setting when Bart heard Ryder’s truck pull up beside the arena. Ryder had called earlier, and Bart had prepared one of the larger stalls for the two new horses. They were comfortable with each other, and Ryder felt it would be best to keep them together for the first few days.

Bart zipped up his jacket, pushed his Stetson tight against his head, and walked out to greet his boss.

“Good to have you back.”

“Good to be back,” Ryder yelled into the strong, north wind. “Let’s get these horses unloaded.”

They each grabbed one and led them into the stall. “They’re beauts,”

Bart said.

“Yeah, just what I was looking for. Now, I’m going up to the house to hug my wife and kids. See you at dinner.” Ryder hurried out.

Bart envied him—having a loving family to come home to. He’d had that once. Could he ever have it again?

He threw some extra hay in the stall for the new horses and headed to the bunkhouse for a shower. He wanted to look his best tonight. Who knew how many more evenings he’d have with Belle? His heart sank. He’d miss this place.

By the time the dinner bell rang, he’d dressed in his nicest jeans, a dark green sweater, and his good boots. He glanced in the mirror—not bad for an old guy. He grabbed his felt Stetson and hurried to the ranch house.

When he walked in the back door, the wind caught the storm door and slammed it against the house with a loud bang. He tugged to pull it back into place. “Sorry about that. The wind is really whipping around.” He hung up his jacket and hat before joining the family in the kitchen. “Good thing you made it back when you did, boss. Looks like a storm is blowing in.”

Haley kissed Ryder’s cheek. “I’m so glad you made it home before it got bad out there.”

Bart took his seat with the family. Belle had made a roast to welcome Ryder home. It was less awkward than the last few meals. Everyone was in a good mood, and Noah had to tell Ryder everything he’d done since he left. They all laughed at his enthusiasm. A few times, he caught Belle smiling at him, and he smiled back, taking a mental picture of her face to file in his memory.

When the meal was over, Ryder turned to him. “Let’s go down to the arena and see how those fillies are doing. Maybe get them out and let them stretch their legs.”

“Can I come see them?” Noah asked.

“Not tonight. It’s dark and very windy. Tomorrow morning, I promise to show them to you. Why don’t you go put on your pajamas, and we’ll read some books when I come back inside?”

“Okay.”

Ryder turned to Haley and smiled. “Be back soon.”

“I’ll be waiting.” She winked at him.

Bart followed Ryder to the arena. They put halters on the horses and

led them around the arena. When they put them back in the stall, Bart said. “I know you want to get back to your family, but I need to talk to you for a minute.”

“What’s up? Is something wrong?”

“No. Not wrong. Something has come up that I need to take care of. I need to go to Billings for a couple days and see my daughter.”

“When do you want to leave?”

“Tomorrow. I waited until you returned, but it’s kind of urgent.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but of course, we can’t keep you here if you have things you need to do.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Have you told my mom?”

Bart twisted his hat in his hands. “No, I’m not good at goodbyes. Can you tell her that something came up? Maybe not tell her until after I’m gone in the morning.”

“Okay.” Ryder looked confused. “Are you planning on coming back?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll let you know.”

Ryder reached out his hand and shook Bart’s. “It’s been great having you. I hope we see you again. Mom was looking forward to having you with us on Christmas, but I know family comes first. Good luck to you.”

“Thanks, now go enjoy your family. I’ll close up things down here.”

Bart watched as Ryder walked away. Was he making the right choice? Yes. It was his only choice. He had to straighten out his own life before he’d have anything to offer to Belle. Then if she still wanted him, maybe they could start fresh. Besides, being here at Pine Mountain Ranch had reminded him how important family was. He owed Summer an apology. His nieces and nephews, too. He had to make it right. He had six days until Christmas. Maybe he could make it back. He was going to try. He packed up his belongings and laid down on his bunk, but sleep wouldn’t come. He lay awake most of the night until he gave up around 4 a.m., carried his stuff to his truck, and, as quietly as he could, drove up the lane and away from the ranch.



Belle had finished a large skillet of cowboy eggs when Ryder walked into the kitchen. She was glad to have him home. “Breakfast is ready. Can you go ring the bell?”

“No need. Bart left early this morning.”

“What?” Her head spun. He’d left? “Where did he go?”

“Not sure exactly. He said he had some family business to attend to.”

This couldn’t be happening. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He only told me last night after dinner. Said he wasn’t good at goodbyes. I’m sorry.”

Belle fought back the tears that were forming in her eyes. “I, I don’t understand. Is he coming back?”

“I don’t know, Mom.”

“But we have his horse.” Had all her planning been for nothing?

“Mom, don’t worry about Banjo. He’s a great horse. If Bart doesn’t come back, he’ll make a good addition to our herd. I told Bart you wanted him here for Christmas, so maybe he’ll take care of what he needs to and come back. He has almost a week.”

Belle’s heart sank. Ryder didn’t know about what had transpired between the two of them. He also didn’t know all of Bart’s backstory. Maybe it had gotten too hard, and he’d run away. Would she ever see him again? She didn’t even know how to contact him. She’d never asked him for his phone number. Why would she? He’d always been right here at the ranch.

Haley and the kids joined them, and Belle pasted on a grandma smile. It wouldn’t do for the kids to see her upset right before Christmas. This holiday was about them. Ryder had obviously shared the news with Haley because she didn’t ask about Bart. Belle made it through the meal and escaped to her room where she fell on her bed and let tears fall. A Christmas romance wasn’t in the cards for her this year—maybe never again.

A half hour later, Belle pushed herself off the bed. She’d had her cry, now she’d get back to her life. The first thing on her agenda was Banjo. She pulled on her boots and headed to the barn where she found Ryder.

“I never got the chance to ask you, how’s Banjo?”

“He seemed fine when I dropped him at the resort—a little skittish in a new place, but that’s to be expected.”

“I want you to bring him here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Bart isn’t here, so there’s no reason to keep him away. He needs to know he’s loved. I can do that for him if he’s here. Will you go get him, please?”

“Of course. Let me finish up here, and I’ll drive over. Do you want to come with me?”

“I’d like that.”

“Great. I’ll come up to the house and get you when I’m ready.”

Belle walked slowly back to the house. If she couldn’t give Bart the merry Christmas she’d planned, she’d try her best to give it to his horse—make him feel at home and loved. It was the least she could do. After the first of the year, if Bart didn’t come back, she’d do her best to find him and reunite him with Banjo. Even if he didn’t want her, he should have his horse.

Chapter Twelve



It was just before noon when Bart drove into the city limits of Billings. He'd called Summer from the road and asked her to have lunch with him. She'd agreed to meet him at a café down the street from her office. He found a parking space right in front and walked in only a few minutes after 12:00.

Summer was already seated at a booth, and she waved to him. She didn't get up to hug him, but she smiled.

"It's good to see you," he said as he took a seat across from her.

She eyed him suspiciously. "What are you doing here, Dad?"

"I wanted to see you. I don't like the way we left things." Bart fiddled with his napkin.

"That was a year ago. Why now?" She wasn't going to make this easy on him.

He looked down at the table. "It took me a while to realize I'd been unfair. I don't want to lose you in my life. You're the only family I have."

Tears welled up in her pretty blue eyes which were so much like her mother's. "I missed you, too, Dad."

He managed a smile. "So, what's new in your life? Tell me everything."

They paused while a waitress took their order.

“Not a whole lot. I still have the same job, and I still love it.”

“Are you seeing anyone?”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve been dating Rick for about six months. He’s a realtor. I think you’d like him.”

“I’m happy for you.” It was good she had someone. He knew Connie’s death had been hard on her, too. “What’s going on with the lawsuit? Any updates?”

Summer sighed. “Not really. Last I heard they were still valuing the land, livestock, equipment, etc. The legal process moves so slowly. Are you thinking about moving back to the ranch?”

“No, but I would like to get the entire matter settled and done. Would you mind if I went to see Dan Masters to get an update?”

“Dad, he’s your lawyer. I’ve just been filling in. I’d love it if you took it over. You know I never wanted to be involved.”

“I’m sorry I put you in the middle of all this. Do you keep in touch with your cousins?”

“Yes, especially Meg and Joanie. We’ve gotten together a few times. Braden is married. Did you know that? His wife is expecting in a couple of months. He’s still on the ranch working with Uncle Drake.”

“Wow. I have missed some things.”

“That’s what happens when you up and leave. So, where have you been? Still working on that ranch up by the Canadian border?”

“No. Not since October. I’ve been working on a horse ranch out west of Butte. It’s beautiful country out there.” Their food came, and the conversation paused while they ate. It was awkward. He wasn’t sure what to say next. Should he tell her about Belle? Would she think it was too soon after her mother passed? If he wanted to fix their relationship, he needed to be honest with her. He could almost hear Belle whispering that in his ear.

He took a drink of his water. “I’m seeing someone, too.”

Summer almost choked on her sandwich. “Really, Dad? That’s great.”

“You don’t think it’s too soon after your mom died?”

“No. It’s been almost two years. I want you to be happy. Mom would want you to be happy. Tell me about her.”

“Her name is Belle. She’s actually the owner of the ranch where I’ve been working. She’s a wonderful, strong woman.”

“Is she the real reason you’re here?”

“No. Yes. Well, in a way. She lives on the ranch with her son, his wife, and their children. They’ve reminded me how important family is, but there’s the issue of Flying V Ranch. I couldn’t let myself get any more involved with Belle when I had absolutely nothing to offer her. I need to get that settled—put a good share of the proceeds away for you, and then hopefully have enough left to be able to help out with her ranch if she’ll have me.”

“That sounds serious. Have you discussed all of this with her? Is she after your money?”

“No. Nothing like that. We just...shared a few moments, and I knew I had to straighten out my own life before I could ask her to get involved with me. Does that make sense?”

“Yes.” She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “There’s my old dad I knew and loved. I’m glad you came. How long are you staying?”

“I’m not sure. I want to meet with Dan and meet your Rick. I could stay for Christmas, but I told Belle that I would be there.”

“Let’s make the most of your time here, then. I have meetings all afternoon, but why don’t you come over to my apartment this evening for dinner? Rick will be there. Maybe you can meet with Dan this afternoon.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He grabbed the check the waitress set on the table. “My treat. I won’t keep you. I know you need to get back to work.” He stood, and she stood with him, and gave him a hug. Why had he stayed away so long?

Dan’s law office was only a few blocks from the café, so Bart decided to walk. Despite the freezing temperature, the bright sun made it feel almost warm. Lunch had gone better than he could have hoped for. It had been so good to see Summer again. He smiled as he walked into the high-rise building and took the elevator to the sixth floor.

“Is Dan Masters available?” he asked the receptionist.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but I’m a client of his. I was in town, so I thought I’d stop by. If he’s not available, I’ll take the next appointment he has.”

The elevator opened. “Bart Stockton?”

Bart turned. “Dan, good to see you.” He shook his hand.

“What brings you in today?”

“I was in town to see Summer and thought I’d stop by and see how our case is coming.”

“Good timing. Summer was on my list of people to call this afternoon. I have some news. Come on back to my office.”

Bart followed him down a long hallway. When they got to Dan’s office, he motioned for Bart to have a seat. “I got a call this morning from Drake’s attorney. It seems that he has another rancher who’d like to buy into the ranch as an equal partner with Drake.”

“What does that mean for us?”

“Well, he can’t sell any of the ranch as long as it is tied up in this litigation, so it encourages him to settle. I can tell you right now, he’s not about to give you half, but if you have a number, you’d be willing to take, that’s less than that, we might be about to reach a deal.”

“What if I insist on fifty percent?”

“Then we take it to trial. That would take another six months at least, and you could end up with nothing.”

“So, you think I should settle?”

“I think you should consider it. I have a folder here with all the evaluations that have been done on the livestock, buildings, and land. Why don’t you take them, look them over, and let me know what you’d be willing to agree to. We can always send them an offer and see what happens.”

“Okay.” Bart took the folder.

“How long are you in town? Through the holidays?”

“No. Just for a couple of days. I’d love to wrap this up before I leave. I’ll be in touch.”

“I’ll tell my secretary to expect your call. We’ll fit you in.”

“Thanks. I appreciate you.”

“Anytime.”

Bart walked back down the street to his car. He’d check into a motel and spend the rest of the afternoon going over the numbers.



At 5:00, Bart rang the doorbell to Summer’s apartment. Maybe once

this case was settled, she could buy herself a nice little house or condo. Summer opened the door and gave him a hug.

“Dad, this is Rick.”

He shook hands with the young man. It was hard to imagine his little girl in a serious relationship, but it was about time. He’d worried that her mother’s death had made her afraid to get close to anyone.

“Nice to meet you. Where are you from, Rick?”

“Born and raised right here in Billings. I love this town.”

“Summer says you’re in real estate?”

“Yeah, residential mostly. I hear you’re into horses.”

Although they didn’t have much in common, as the evening progressed, Bart found himself liking Rick more and more. He seemed to generally care about Summer. And although Bart doubted that he could tell the difference between a colt and a filly, he had a steady job he liked. Summer had voiced many times that she preferred city life to life on the ranch, so they were a good match.

After they’d eaten, Bart turned to Summer. “I met with Dan Masters, and there are things we need to talk about.”

Rick took it as his cue to give them some time alone. “I have some work to finish at the office.” He turned to Summer, “See you later?”

“You bet.” She gave him a light kiss, then led Bart into her small living room. “What’s up, Dad?”

“Dan heard from Drake’s lawyer. He has a rancher who wants to partner with him, so they want to buy us out. I’ve been going over the numbers. Dan says we won’t get fifty percent, but if we reach an agreement this will be over and done. He wanted me to get him a number to propose to Drake’s attorney, but I think it would be better for me to talk to Drake in person. I want to drive over to The Flying V tomorrow. What do you think?”

“I hate that you and Uncle Drake have been at odds, but do you think he’ll talk to you?”

“I won’t know unless I try. Do you want to take this to trial and try to get a larger amount?”

“Dad, I’ve told you that I never cared about the money for me. I’m fine. I want you to have enough for a new start. Whatever you think is fair is fine with me. And yes, it would be good for you to go to the ranch. Maybe get some closure. If it doesn’t work, you can always let Dan negotiate. I’d go

with you, but I have a really busy day at work tomorrow.”

“That’s fine. I need to do this by myself. I’ll keep in touch. Thank you for a wonderful dinner, and I like Rick.”

“Thanks, Dad.” They hugged again before he left. If nothing else, Bart had started to repair his relationship with Summer. That, in itself, was worth the trip.



Belle flipped on the lights to the arena and was greeted by whinnies from several of the horses in the stalls surrounding it. She walked toward the far end where they’d put Banjo in the stall next to her horse, White Cloud. She stopped at the barrel of horse treats and filled her pockets. Both horses stuck their heads over the gates. Banjo had been here two days now, and he was settling in nicely. Belle made it a priority to give him attention several times each day, so he’d get used to her.

She tried to imagine what it would feel like to be a horse and have your person leave. Then months later, have a stranger take you from the only home you’d known and move you to another place with all new people. It had to be hard, so she’d do what she could to bond with him. She held out her hand with a treat.

He was a magnificent dark sorrel gelding, standing sixteen hands high. No wonder Bart had chosen him. How hard it must have been to leave him behind. Banjo hadn’t been ridden since he arrived, so tonight Belle decided to tack him up and give him some exercise. She led him to the middle of the arena and swung into the saddle. He responded immediately to her commands. She started out slowly, walking him around the arena. He had such a smooth gait. Gradually, she worked him into a trot and then a slow canter. She didn’t know if she’d ever ridden a horse who was so responsive.

After about a half hour, she reined him to a stop and jumped off. “What a good boy you are.” She patted him on the neck and gave him another treat. If Bart never came back, she’d keep him for herself. White Cloud was getting older, and it would be nice to have a younger horse for long trail rides. She unsaddled and brushed him down, before heading to White Cloud’s stall. She didn’t want to neglect her, so she took her for her

own spin in the arena.

The door opened, and Ryder joined her. “What are you doing down here so late, Mom?”

“I came to see Banjo. We had a nice ride, but I thought White Cloud might feel left out, so I’m exercising her, too.”

Ryder smiled. “How was Banjo to ride?”

“He’s amazing. If Bart doesn’t come back, I want to keep him for me.”

“We can do that. Whatever you want.”

Belle climbed off and walked over to her son. “What exactly did Bart say before he left? Did he indicate he was coming back?”

“Mom. I already told you everything. He said he needed to be gone for a couple days to take care of something and see his daughter. When I asked if he was coming back, he said he’d let me know. That’s it. It was a short conversation.”

“Okay.” Belle shivered. The wind rattled the barn. It was getting cold even inside the arena.

“Why don’t you head back to the house? I’ll put White Cloud away for you and lock up.”

“Thanks, Ryder. Have I told you lately how much I love you?”

“Every day, Mom. Every day. I love you, too.”

Belle pulled her coat around her neck and hurried to the house. She poured herself a cup of warm tea and joined Haley in the living room. “Are you ready for Christmas?” she asked.

“I’d better be since it’s only three days away. How about you? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I know you and Bart had gotten close. Do you miss him?”

“It doesn’t matter. He chose to leave. And I’ve got you kids. It’s all I need.”

“It’s okay to be sad.”

Had she been giving off that vibe? Time to pull herself together. She refused to bring down everyone’s Christmas because of a silly broken dream. She had her family, and that made her rich beyond belief. “I’m not sad. It’s Christmas—my favorite time of year. Now, tell me about everything you got for Noah. He’s going to love Christmas this year.”

Later, when she made her way to her room, she knew that she had to put Bart behind her. With every day that passed, it seemed less likely that he'd return. She'd regret it if she didn't snap out of her funk and enjoy her family for the holiday.

Chapter Thirteen



Bart slowed his truck as he turned into Flying V Ranch. A rush of mixed emotions slammed into him like a runaway horse—sadness, joy, anger all swirled inside of him. The ranch looked pretty much the same as when he drove out the gate almost a year ago. He'd loved this place with all of its wide-open spaces. He wished he could go back and stop the last two years from happening—maybe if he'd gone with her that night....

He drove past the old ranch house and pulled up in front of the house where Drake and his family had resided. His palms were sweating. He rubbed them on his jeans and walked up and knocked on the door before he changed his mind. The door opened.

“Bart? Ain't you a sight for sore eyes.” Drake's wife, Loretta, pulled him into a hug. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to Drake. Is he around?”

“Somewhere. You know Drake. Probably in one of the barns. Do you want to come in? We could have some coffee and catch up.”

Bart sighed. “I'd love to, but first I need to talk to Drake. It's good to see you.”

“You, too. You look good.”

“Thanks. I'll wander down to the barns and see if I can find him.” He

returned to his truck, grabbed the file folder, and headed toward the first barn. Loretta had always been nice to him, even after Connie passed. He glanced up the hill on the other side of the barns to the house he'd built for Connie. It had been his home for so long. It looked the same.

He walked into the dim barn. A man was grooming a horse at the far end of the aisle. "Drake."

His brother-in-law spun around and frowned at him. "Bart."

Bart walked up and stuck out his hand. Reluctantly, Drake shook it.

"What brings you back here?" There was ice in his tone.

"I spoke with Dan Masters yesterday. He told me about the offer you have. Can I ask who it's from?"

"Rex Cummings. He's looking to expand. We'd work well together. His family has been in this valley as long as ours."

"I like Rex. He's an upstanding guy." An awkward moment of silence followed. "Look, I know you can't take his offer while there's a pending lawsuit."

"Are you here to drop it?"

"No, but I'm here to talk. Can we sit down and discuss it?"

"I suppose. Let me put this horse up, and we can talk in the office."

Bart turned and walked to the next barn and into the office that he'd shared with Bill for many years. It looked different. There were papers spread everywhere along with several empty coffee cups. Drake had never had a head for business. He needed someone to help out before he ran this place into the ground. Bart moved a stack of folders and sat down on a dusty chair.

He didn't have to wait long. Drake rushed in and sat behind the desk. "So, you called this meeting. What do you have to offer?"

Bart opened the folder in front of him. "I've had the chance to go over the various appraisals and valuations. Whether you believe it or not, I want The Flying V to stay in your family. Also, things have changed in my life. I no longer want to be a part of it. So, I have an amount I'd be willing to take to walk away and give you the ranch free and clear. He slid a paper with the number over to Drake. We could structure it so as to close with me the same time as you close with Rex. That way, you could use some of his buy-in to pay me."

Drake looked at the number and frowned. "I can't agree to this."

"Then what would you agree to?"

Forty-five minutes later, the two shook hands, having reached a deal that was palatable to both of them.

“What about your house?” Drake asked. “I’m assuming it’s part of this deal? Do you want to remove your personal items.”

“No one is living there?”

“Nope. It’s the same as the day you left. We didn’t know what you wanted to keep.”

Bart had run away and left all his memories behind. He didn’t want or need the furniture, but there probably were some small personal items he might want. It was time to face going through everything. All of Connie’s clothes still hung in her closet. “Of course, it’s part of the deal. Why don’t you let Braden and his wife have it? I heard they’re expecting. I guess I should go through and see if there’s anything I want to keep. Braden could walk through with me. Any furniture they want, they’re welcome to it. The rest I’ll rent a truck and get it moved out today or tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to rent a truck. You know we have plenty of them on the ranch. Use whatever you need.”

“Thank you. There is one other thing I want. Banjo. I want my horse. I’ll find a trailer and take him with me tomorrow.”

Drake stared down at his desk. “I’m sorry, Bart. He’s not here. We sold him.”

“What?” Bart glared at Drake.

“I had all our available horses up on our website. I didn’t think you were coming back. We needed to sell a few. Anyway, a buyer showed up just last week. I showed him several horses, but the only one he wanted was Banjo—gave me a good price for him.”

“Who bought him? Anyone I know?” Maybe he could buy his horse back.

“No. A horse breeder from out west.”

Bart sighed. There was nothing he could do. “Okay, well let’s call the lawyers and get this thing written up. I’d like to sign it before I leave. Then I’ll work on cleaning out the house.”

Drake’s face softened. “Stay for dinner. Loretta and the kids would love to see you.”

“Okay. Sure.” He was mending fences. It wouldn’t hurt to remember that they’d all once been family. Drake had loved Connie, too.

Bart left the barn and walked up the path toward his marital home. So many memories. He kept walking up the hill behind the house to the ridge. This was where he'd spread Connie's ashes. He brushed the snow off a large boulder, sat down, and looked out over the valley. Connie had loved it up here. He felt her presence. Softly, he told her about Belle and the new life he wanted to start. He knew she'd be pleased that he'd made peace with Summer and Drake. She'd loved them both so much. He sat in silence. Then, his thoughts turned to Belle. Would she forgive him for leaving and want to pick up where they'd left off? Or would she have washed her hands of him? He wouldn't blame her if it was the latter.

He needed to get home for Christmas. He shook his head. He'd just thought of Pine Mountain Ranch as home. He was in love with Belle. The realization came crashing down on him. It was December 22nd. He had three days to wrap things up here and get back. He stood, brushed off his jeans, and headed to the house.



The snow was coming down heavy now, and Bart was forced to slow his truck even more. He wanted to get back to Pine Meadows in one piece. It had been a productive two days. He'd cleaned everything Braden didn't want out of his marital home. There were a couple of boxes of keepsakes and mementos in the back of his pickup, along with all of the rest of his clothes. He'd completely filled one of the ranch's flatbed trucks with everything else. Part of the load he dropped off at a thrift store, and the rest went into a small storage unit in the closest town. He paid a year's rent on the unit in advance. It would buy him some time to decide what to do with it. Who knew where he'd be a year from now? He knew where he wanted to be.

He'd enjoyed a nice dinner with Drake and his family and although they'd never be close friends, he hoped to keep in touch. Connie would expect nothing less from him. Then he'd headed back to Billings.

He'd signed the paperwork with Dan. It was a done deal, now. All he had to do was wait for his proceeds. Summer invited him to an early Christmas dinner and insisted he spend the night in her guest room. He'd agreed. He'd wanted to spend as much time as possible with her before he

left.

He was amazed that she'd prepared a full-blown Christmas dinner. Besides himself, she'd invited Rick and his parents. He thoroughly enjoyed all of them. Summer expressed her happiness that he'd reached a settlement with Drake. His life was falling into place. It had been hard to drive away this morning, but he'd promised to visit again soon, and Summer had promised to come to Pine Meadows to visit him. Now, he prayed that he'd still have a home in Pine Meadows when he got back.

Suddenly, he slapped the steering wheel. It was Christmas Eve, and he'd been so busy that he'd forgotten all about Belle's painting. He pulled over at the next exit and found Tommy's number.

"Hey, Bart, I was wondering when you'd call."

"Sorry, time got away from me. Is it done?"

"Yep."

"Great. I'm driving home from Billings and should get to Bozeman around noon. Can I pick it up then?"

"I'll be around all day." Tommy rattled off his address, and Bart entered it in his GPS. "Maybe we can get some lunch and catch up while you're here."

Bart was tempted to say he didn't have time. All he wanted was to get back to Belle, but Tommy had done him a huge favor. "Sure, that would be nice. See you in a few hours."

At 12:15, Bart stopped in front of the address he'd been given. It was on the outskirts of Bozeman—a log home with a small barn beside it. It suited him.

He knocked and was greeted by his longtime friend. "Bart, you old cowboy, it's great to see you."

"You, too. How long has it been?"

"Too many moons. Come in out of the snow."

Bart walked into a cozy living room furnished with natural wood and Western decor. "I like your place."

"Thanks. My studio is in the basement. Follow me."

Bart followed him down a rickety set of stairs and into a huge open room filled with paintings and other pieces of Western art. Bart spotted it immediately. It looked exactly like the Pine Mountain ranch house, and Tommy had captured the lights perfectly. They seemed to shine off the

canvas.

“Tommy, it’s perfect.” He walked over to examine it more closely.

“I’m glad you like it. You said it’s a Christmas present? Would you like to gift wrap it? The wife has plenty of wrapping paper around here.”

“That would be great.”

While Tommy went to get the paper, Bart walked around the room to look at Tommy’s other work. His heart stopped. There was a stunning painting of Connie doing one of her signature tricks. A flood of emotion crashed against him. She’d been so beautiful.

Tommy walked back in the room and smiled. “One of my best.” He walked up and put his hand on Bart’s shoulder. “Would you like to take it with you?”

Bart hesitated. He could take it and hang it by some lonely bunk for the rest of his life, only looking back at the past. Or, he could move on. More than anything, he wanted a life with Belle. She didn’t seem like the jealous type, but hanging a large painting of his former wife didn’t seem like the kind thing to do. “Thanks, but I don’t think it’s a good idea. Could you do me a favor? Could you mail it to my daughter, Summer? I’m sure that she’d love it. I’ll give you her address and pay for the postage.”

“No problem. Don’t worry about the postage.”

Together they did a somewhat decent job of wrapping the boxes containing both paintings. Tommy suggested they head to a local diner for lunch. Bart carefully loaded the painting into the cab of his truck. He had a giant tarp covering his belongings in the bed of the truck, but he wasn’t going to risk the painting getting damaged. It was too important. He managed to wedge it securely behind the seats.

He followed Tommy to the diner, where they enjoyed an excellent lunch and caught up on the last thirty years of their lives. As Bart grabbed the check at the end of their meal, he asked. “I need to buy some toys for Belle’s grandkids. Is there a mall or toy store near here?”

Tommy smiled. “Better. There’s a ranch supply store down the road. They carry a lot of toy trucks, ranch vehicles, and animals. Would something like that work?”

“It would be perfect.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’d much prefer to shop in a ranch and feed store over a mall any day.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Especially on Christmas Eve.” Bart gave his old friend a hug. “Keep in touch.”

“I will. I hope your lady friend likes the painting.”

“She’ll love it.”

Bart drove down the road and quickly found the store. Tommy had been right. He picked out some toy farm machinery and trucks for the boys and the cutest stuffed horse for Cassidy.

“I don’t suppose you giftwrap?” he asked the clerk.

“As a matter of fact, we do.”

Bart smiled. Everything was falling into place. In a few short hours, he’d be back with the people he wanted to be with the most. He got in his truck and headed west.

The interstate had been plowed, and despite the heavy snow, it was easy going through Butte, but when he turned on the smaller road that led over the pass, it was a different story. The road was icy and snow packed. Bart slowed down even more and prayed they didn’t close the mountain pass before he got there. He was so close.

Chapter Fourteen



Belle bustled around the kitchen. She'd already started everything for tomorrow's dinner that could be prepared ahead of time. It would make things so much easier tomorrow. Tonight, they'd have a simple meal of sandwiches and soup before they all went to the candlelight service at Pine Community Church. Since Noah's arrival at the ranch, they'd gone to the early service so they could get the kids home and in bed at a decent hour.

She glanced out the window at the snow which was coming down heavily now. She'd always loved snow on Christmas Eve. This year though, tears filled her eyes. It seemed to emphasize the fact that Bart would not make it back for Christmas. The last few days, she'd held out hope, jumping every time she'd heard a noise outside, hoping it was his truck. But as the days passed, her hope faded away. If only she had another chance to tell him how much she cared.

Noah ran into the kitchen. "Grandma! It's almost Christmas."

Belle smiled. "I know. Just a few more hours."

"I've been really good this year, so Santa is going to bring me lots of presents."

Belle laughed. It was hard not to catch some of his enthusiasm.

"Did you see all the presents under our tree?"

“I did.”

“What did you ask Santa for, Grandma?”

Belle paused. She’d asked for Bart to come back, but maybe she hadn’t been good enough this year. “I asked for us all to be happy and healthy.”

“That’s silly.” Noah ran out of the room.

Funny how presence meant more than presents the older one got. She hoped she’d be present with her family for many years to come.

After dinner, Belle hurried up to her room to change for church. At the small church in Pine Meadows, boots and jeans were not only acceptable, but common attire. Belle considered wearing what she had on, but it was Christmas Eve. Maybe she’d feel more festive if she dressed up a bit. She picked out a bright green blouse and a long western skirt and paired them with fashion boots with higher than her normal heels. Even though she’d had them for several years, they looked brand new. She spent most of her days in her cowboy boots.

She slipped them on and looked in the mirror, pleased with the result. She might have to hold onto Ryder’s arm to walk into the church, but it would be worth it. When she got back downstairs, Ryder’s family was dressed and in the living room.

“Ready, Mom?”

“Yep. Let’s do this.”

“I’m going to pull the SUV up to the door, so you and the kids don’t get covered in snow.”

“I like to be covered in snow,” Noah said.

Haley laughed. “That is fun, but not right before church. You don’t want to be wet and cold. Now, let’s go out on the porch and wait for Dad.”



Bart let out a huge sigh of relief when he finally turned into the Pine Mountain Ranch lane. If he hadn’t had four-wheel-drive, he wouldn’t have made it over the pass. As it was, he bet they would close it down before morning. He’d only passed two other cars the whole way down this side of the mountain.

He was home. His heart thumped in his chest. Would Belle be happy to see him? He'd soon find out. He parked in his usual spot by the barn and hurried toward the house. Should he go in through the mudroom? He hesitated. He'd been gone. Was he welcome? He turned the other way and walked up on the front porch, stomping his boots to knock off some of the snow. He knocked on the door and waited. Nothing. He knocked harder. Where was everyone? Not to be deterred, he followed the wrap-around porch to the back door. Sure enough, it was unlocked, as always. He opened it and stepped into the mudroom. "Hello. Anyone home?"

He was greeted by more silence. Where could they be? That's right, it was Christmas Eve. He bet they'd gone to some kind of Christmas Eve service. What should he do now? He remembered the presents. He'd slip them under the tree while they were out. He hurried to his truck, grabbed the painting as well as the bags with toys, and walked back into the mudroom. He slipped off his snowy boots and made his way into the living room. He felt a little like a burglar, sneaking into someone else's home. There were so many presents under the tree. He slipped the large box in the back against the wall and then laid the kids' presents in front of the other packages and hurried back the way he'd come. Mission accomplished. Now, even if Belle didn't want to see him, at least they'd have their gifts.

After grabbing his duffle bag, he headed to the bunkhouse to wait for their return. He was tired. It had been a long day of stressful driving. He turned up the heat and laid down on his bunk. It looked the same as when he'd left. He closed his eyes—he'd rest for just a moment.



The service had been beautiful, as always. Belle had sat next to Wendy and her new husband, Bryce, as well as Cheyenne and the handsome young teacher, Colby, whom she was engaged to, and his daughter, Emma. It seemed like all her friends had fallen in love this past year and were moving forward with their lives. She was happy for them, but it emphasized how alone she was. When the lights were dimmed, the candles were lit, and they joined in singing Silent Night, tears filled her eyes. Why was she so emotional this year?

After the service, Belle climbed in the front seat next to Ryder, while Haley sat in back between the two kids. Belle stared out the window into the falling snow. The snow-covered pine trees, illuminated in the headlights, sparkled almost magically. Christmas was a season of magic and miracles. She closed her eyes, and all she could see was Bart's smiling face. She hoped that wherever he was, he was happy.

Despite the snowy roads, the drive went by quickly. As Ryder turned into their lane, he softly asked, "Are they asleep?"

"Yes," Haley whispered.

Belle looked back to see both of her grandkids with their heads leaned against their mom and their eyes closed. How nice to be that young and carefree.

"Okay. I'm going to drive up to the front porch, and we can carry them inside. With any luck, they won't wake up until morning."

Belle rubbed the side window with her hand to get rid of the fog and stared out into the falling snow. No Christmas stars would be visible tonight. When they reached the curve by the barn, she saw it. "Stop!" she yelled.

Ryder slammed on the brakes and skidded sideways in the snow. "What is it, Mom? Did an animal jump in front of us?"

"No. Sorry, but isn't that Bart's truck?"

Ryder looked to the side at the truck covered in snow. "You're right. It is. I wonder when he got back?" He pushed on the gas pedal.

"Wait. Let me out." Belle had already started to open her door.

Ryder stopped the vehicle again. "Mom, don't you want to come up to the house first? Maybe change into some snow boots?"

"Nope." She opened the door and stepped out before Ryder could protest. Her high-heeled boots immediately sank into a foot of snow. "I'll be fine. See you in the morning."

Ryder shook his head as she slammed the door shut. She gingerly took a step and slid another few inches. She needed to be careful. She didn't want a repeat of breaking her foot. Her heart beat faster. Where was he? Maybe the arena? She carefully made her way to the large barn and peered inside. All was dark and quiet. He must be in the bunkhouse. She slowly followed the path that led behind the barn. Fat snowflakes landed on her eyelashes and stuck. She rounded the next barn, and the bunkhouse came into view. Yep, there was a light on inside and snowy footprints leading up onto

the small porch.

He'd come back for Christmas. Maybe Christmas miracles really did happen. She stepped carefully onto the porch and knocked.

"Come in."

She opened the door and stepped inside. Bart pushed himself up into a sitting position on his bed. His smile said it all.

"Hi, Belle. You look nice."

"You're back."

"Yep. Did you think I'd miss Belle Brooks' famous Christmas dinner?"

She flew across the small room, sat down on the edge of the bed next to him, and found his lips with hers. His strong arms encircled her and pulled her to him as he deepened the kiss.

"God, I missed you," he whispered as he covered her face with kisses. He leaned back on the pillows, and she snuggled into him. He felt so good—so right.

It was as if no time had passed since they were last in each other's arms. But it had. He'd left. She pushed back, leaned on her arm, and stared into his emerald-green eyes. "Where have you been? You didn't even say goodbye."

"I've always been terrible at goodbyes, and I didn't know how long I'd be gone."

"You hurt me." Tears welled in her eyes.

"I never meant to. I thought about you every day—all day."

She wanted to believe him. Did she dare risk her heart? She stared at him, waiting for an explanation.

"I went to Billings and made up with Summer."

"Oh, Bart. That's wonderful."

"It was time—past time. She has a serious boyfriend, Rick. I got to meet him as well as his parents. They're great people. She even cooked an early Christmas dinner for me last night."

"You didn't want to stay with her for Christmas?"

"I told her I needed to get back to you."

"You did?" He told his daughter about her?

"Yep. She looks forward to meeting you. But that's not all. I went to The Flying V Ranch and worked out a deal with Drake."

“That’s wonderful.”

“Yeah, he had someone who wanted to be his partner, but he couldn’t do anything with our lawsuit hanging over his head, so he was motivated to settle. We came up with a deal that was acceptable to both of us.”

“You gave up your interest in The Flying V?”

“It’s not my home anymore. It belongs in their family. I don’t think Drake and I will ever be best friends, but we’ll keep in touch. I got to see my nieces and nephews. It was important since Summer is still close to her cousins. Then, I cleaned out my marital home and gave most of our belongings away. A few are in storage. It feels good to have it done.”

“I’m happy for you, but why now? Why right before Christmas?”

“Because of you. I wanted to be with you—I told you that, but I had nothing financially to offer you.”

“I don’t need your money.” Belle bristled.

“I know you don’t, but if we are going to do this, I need to be an equal partner, not someone you have to support. I can do that now. I have a substantial amount in the bank. Or I will when the deal closes in a few weeks. I hope you understand that I couldn’t start a new relationship without tying up the loose ends of my last one.” He paused and pulled her to him. “So, here I am offering you my heart if you want it.”

“I can’t think of anything I want more.” She found his lips again and clung to him. She didn’t ever want to let go.

He pulled back and grinned. “How do you feel about spending the night in this bunkhouse with an old cowboy?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Belle sighed. “I would if it was any other night of the year, but Noah will be up at the crack of dawn to open presents. I need to be there.”

Bart ran his fingers down her soft cheek. “I understand. Family comes first. I’d never want to come between you and your grandkids.” He hated to let her go even for the night.

“I have a better idea. Why don’t you come up to the house with me for the night? That way, you can be there to open presents with us.”

“Seriously? But what about Ryder? Will he be okay with this?”

“I don’t really care what he thinks, but yes, he really likes you. He’s a big boy. He’ll be fine. I don’t want to hide what we have together. Will you

come spend the night with me?”

His body reacted to the thought. If he was doing this, he had to be all in. No more holding back. “I’d love to spend the night with you, darling.” He gave her one more long, slow kiss and sat up and pulled on his boots. “Let’s go.”

Belle smiled. He loved seeing her happy. “Did you come straight to the bunkhouse when you got back?” she asked as he put on his coat.

“First, I went to the house, but no one was home.”

“Is that all?”

What was she getting at? Did she know about the presents? No, there’s no way she could know. “I had some gifts for the kids, so I let myself in and put them under the tree. I hope that’s alright.”

“It’s perfectly fine. That’s so nice of you. I was wondering if you stopped by the arena.”

“No, I was tired from the drive, so I came straight here. Did you want to stop and check on the horses now?”

“No. I was just curious. Let’s get up to the house.”

They walked out onto the porch. The snow was still coming down. He picked her up into his arms.

“What are you doing?” She giggled.

“Carrying you. It’s much too slippery for those sexy boots you have on.”

“I made it down here, didn’t I?”

“You did. But why take chances? Besides, I like having you in my arms.” To his relief, she didn’t argue but leaned against him instead. He tromped through the deep snow to the back door and put her down in the mudroom. Quietly, they took off their boots and coats, and she took his hand and led him to the back staircase. He felt like a teenager trying to sneak into a girl’s house without being caught by her parents. She got to the fifth step and paused. “This one squeaks. Step over it.”

He laughed and followed her lead. When she got to the top of the stairs, she opened the first door and pulled him into her room, turning to lock the door behind them. He swept her in his arms once more and carried her to the large, four-poster bed. Gently he laid her down and then laid down beside her.

The room was dark except for the reflection of the Christmas lights on

the snow outside a large window. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he gazed at her beautiful face and saw his own emotions reflected right back at him. “I love you, Belle Brooks—with all my heart.”

“I love you, too, Bart. Don’t ever leave me again.”

“I won’t, I promise.” Then his lips were on hers, and his body wrapped around her. He’d be content to stay like this forever.

Chapter Fifteen



Bart awoke with a start. What was that noise? He smiled as he looked down at Belle snuggled against his chest. His arm was asleep under her, but he didn't care. Outside, the sun was peeking over the eastern horizon. He glanced at the bedside clock. 6:00. He pulled her close.

There it was again. Maybe it was a shutter outside banging against the house. Just as he closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of her, there was a light knock on the door.

"Grandma, wake up."

Belle's eyes flew open, and she smiled up at him and mouthed the words "I told you." He was thankful she'd thought to lock the door last night.

"Grandma, are you awake? Mom says I can't open my presents until you come down."

Belle smiled. "I'm awake. Can you give me fifteen minutes to get up and dressed?"

"How about ten?" The kid was a negotiator already.

"Ten, it is. I'll see you down there."

Bart smiled as he listened to the tiny footsteps going back down the stairs. "Merry Christmas, darling."

"Merry Christmas to you." She touched his lips, and he pulled her

close.

“Are you sure he won’t give us an hour so I can make love to you again?” He ran kisses down her chest.

Belle sighed. “No chance. If we’re not down there in ten minutes, I guarantee he’ll be back.

Bart groaned. “Okay.”

Belle threw back the covers and headed toward the attached bathroom. He loved her naked body. She got to the door and turned back to look at him. “What are you staring at? Are you regretting your decision in the light of day when you can see my sagging boobs and wrinkles?”

He smiled. “Just the opposite. I was thinking how absolutely beautiful you are and how I’m the luckiest man in the world.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” she said as she disappeared behind the door.

It wasn’t just flattery. He meant every word of it.

Belle couldn’t stop herself from smiling as she washed her face, combed her hair, and put on a pair of black tights and a bright red Christmas sweater. Was it her imagination, or were her lips slightly bruised from all the kissing? What a night it had been. All thoughts that she was too old for this had vanished into thin air. She couldn’t remember a night of lovemaking she’d ever enjoyed so much.

The door squeaked open a crack. “Can I come in?”

“Absolutely.”

He was already dressed, and he walked up behind her and circled her waist with his arms. “You wouldn’t have a spare toothbrush I could use, would you?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” She pulled one, still in the package, out of a bottom drawer. “Here you go.”

She watched as he brushed his teeth before giving him another long, slow kiss. “Ready?” she asked.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to quietly sneak out the back door and act as if I’m coming up from the bunkhouse?”

“Positive.” She grabbed his hand. “We’ve got nothing to hide.” She wanted the whole world to know that he was her guy.

When they got to the kitchen, she paused to start a pot of coffee. She

could hear Noah's excited voice in the other room. "Can I go and make sure Grandma is awake?"

"No. Give her a minute."

"It's already been so many minutes," he whined.

Belle smiled at Bart. "I think that's our cue." They walked into the living room together. If Haley or Ryder were surprised to see them together, they did a good job of not showing it.

"Finally!" Noah exclaimed. He ran up and gave Belle a hug. Then he turned to Bart. "Mr. Bart. You're back." He hugged him, also. "Can I open my presents now?"

Belle sat down on the couch and motioned for Bart to join her.

"Go ahead," Ryder said.

Noah ripped into one present and then another, barely pausing to look at each gift before moving on to the next. He was so excited that it was contagious. Bart had gotten him a toy truck and horse trailer complete with four plastic horses. How thoughtful. Noah loved it. As he ripped through his presents, Haley opened the ones for Cassidy. She smiled and made happy noises.

While Noah played with a remote control truck, Haley and Ryder exchanged presents and handed several to her. She felt bad that Bart didn't have any presents to open, but the one she had waiting for him would be even better.

When most of the gifts were opened, Haley set aside the ones for Annie and her family. They'd be here in a couple of hours. Bart got up and walked to the back of the tree and pulled out a large, flat box. Belle hadn't even noticed it. He set it in front of her. "Merry Christmas."

"For me? You didn't need to."

"Of course, I did. Open it."

Her hands shook as she tore off the bright wrapping paper to reveal a box inside. She opened the top and pulled out the painting. Tears welled in her eyes. "It's our ranch. How did you do this?"

"A friend of mine, a Native American artist, painted it from a picture I sent him."

"It's gorgeous." She held it up for Ryder and Haley to see and leaned over and gave Bart a big kiss on the mouth.

Noah looked at them curiously. "Is Mr. Bart your boyfriend,

Grandma?”

Belle smiled. “Yes, he is.”

Bart smiled back at her.

“Good. I like him.”

She had a boyfriend. On Christmas. Christmas miracles were real. “There’s coffee in the kitchen, and I’m going to put the sweet rolls in the oven. But first”—she looked at Bart—“I need you to come with me.”

He looked confused but got up and followed her into the kitchen.

“What’s up?” he said. “Do you need some more kisses?”

Belle laughed. “I do, but I need you to do something for me first. Put on your boots and coat and come with me.”

“Okay.” What was she up to? Did she want some more alone time with him? He was onboard with that. He followed her out into the crisp, cold morning. The snow had stopped, and the sun beat down on the snowy landscape. This time, she wore proper snow boots, so he took her hand as they walked side-by-side toward the barns.

When she got to the arena, she stopped, opened the large door, and pulled him inside with her.

“Are we going for a ride?”

“You’ll see.” She flipped on the lights, and several horses whinnied from their stalls.

As they walked toward the far end, he heard an unmistakable sound as a sorrel horse stuck his head over a gate and whinnied loudly. “Banjo?” Bart dropped her hand and hurried toward the stall. Banjo shook his head up and down and nuzzled against Bart’s face. He threw his arms around the horse’s neck.

Belle’s hand touched his back. “Merry Christmas, Bart.”

He turned to face her with tears in his eyes. “How did you pull this off?”

“I bought him and had Ryder pick him up when he got the other two horses. Are you surprised?”

“Totally. When Drake told me he’d sold him, I thought I’d lost him forever. This is the best present anyone has ever given me, but why did you spend all the money and go to the trouble to do this?”

Belle looked up and smiled. “Because I love you.”

“Even before last night?”

“I think I started falling for you that first morning you showed up here.”

“With my scruffy beard and long hair?”

“Yep.”

“You know, I fell for you that first day, too. Why else would I have tried to clean myself up? I’m still not sure what you see in an old, broken-down cowboy like me.”

Belle stood on her tiptoes, so their faces were even. “I see my future.”

His lips found hers as he pulled her to him for a long, deep kiss. Banjo pushed his head between the two of them, and they both laughed.

Love and laughter. The best gifts of all. Bart vowed to spend the rest of his life filling her days with both.

DID YOU LOVE THIS STORY? If you’d like to know when I’ll be releasing my next book, go to my website www.jillhaymaker.com and sign up for my monthly newsletter. **ALSO, HOP OVER TO AMAZON AND LEAVE ME A REVIEW.**

WHAT’S NEXT?

In the fall 2023, I will be releasing my next book ***THE BOY IN THE PINK CONVERTIBLE***. Check out a sneak peek at Chapter One here:

Chapter One



Today, it didn’t feel like home. Megan Forrester walked up the worn steps onto the familiar, stone front porch. The porch where she’d taken her first steps, played hopscotch with her friends, posed for her prom pictures, and more recently sat and just watched the sunrise with Mom. All that had changed when Mom passed three weeks ago. Now it just felt like a house.

She reached under the old clay flowerpot for the key. There it was.

Just like it had been since before she was born. She opened the door and stepped inside. All the curtains had been pulled shut. She blinked to adjust her eyes to the dark interior. First things first. She walked around the room, opening windows to let in fresh air and sunshine. Then she made a beeline to the kitchen and the Mr. Coffee machine that was older than she was. Mom had prided herself on owning one of the first ones made and swore that it made better coffee than any of the newer, fancier coffee makers. Megan started the coffee perking and opened the cupboard that contained at least fifty mismatched coffee mugs. She smiled there were Mom's favorites that read "World's Best Mom", "Happy Mother's Day", and various other similar sentiments. She took them out and set them on the counter. It didn't seem right to drink out of any of them. Then she found the one with the beautiful mountain scenery and Rocky Mountain National Park in bright, bold letters. When had they taken that family trip? She'd been in grade school at the time. She remembered how fun it was for all five of them to be together.

Megan was a full ten years younger than her sister, Sally, and twelve years younger than her brother, Tom. They had loved to tease her and tell her that her birth had been a mistake, but she preferred to think that her parents had just really wanted another child. Whichever it was, her siblings were so much older than she was that they hadn't been very close growing up. She was still in grade school when they both headed off to college. Tom was married with teenagers and lived in California, while Sally was also married with two toddlers and lived three hours away in Cincinnati.

Megan was the only one who had stayed in their small hometown of Bridgetown, Ohio. She wasn't sure exactly why she'd stayed. Maybe because she felt the need to take care of her parents, and then Mom, after Dad passed two years ago. Or maybe she just didn't have anywhere better to be. She graduated from Ohio State University with a degree in accounting and came home to work at the CPA firm her parents had always used. That had been ten years ago. Where had the time gone, and what did she have to show for it? Unlike her siblings, she was still single, lived in a one-bedroom apartment, and had no social life to speak of. Now, her parents were both gone and so was her purpose in life.

Taking her coffee with her, she walked over to the faded gold velour couch, that had possibly been fashionable in its day. She sat down and stared at the piles of boxes stacked all over the tiny living room. Sally and Tom had

been kind enough to help lug some of them up from the basement the day after the funeral before they both returned home. Now she was left with the monumental task of going through them alone. Tom had suggested they hire one of those estate sale companies and just let them go through everything, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. What if they missed something important? Although for the life of her, she couldn't imagine what that would be.

Anyway, she had all weekend to see what kind of a dent she could make in the piles. She opened the lid of the first dust-covered cardboard box and sneezed. Next time, she'd remember to take an allergy pill before coming over. The box contained nothing but old receipts for household expenses.

She needed a system. She put the box in what would be the recycle pile. She'd also need a trash pile, a donate pile, and a keep pile. The last one she suspected would be rather small. She didn't have room for much stuff in her small apartment, and her siblings had already expressed that they wanted nothing. The next two boxes were more of the same. This could be a long day.

Suddenly, the front door squeaked open. "Hello?" Megan smiled when she heard the voice of her best friend and co-worker, Shelly. "Wow, what a mess."

"What are you doing here?"

"You said you'd be here all weekend, so I thought I'd stop by. How's it going?"

"How do you think?" Megan swept her arms to include all of the boxes. "Help yourself to some coffee."

Shelly filled a mug and came and sat beside her. "So, are you finding treasures?"

Megan laughed. "So far just old receipts. Why they kept all of this stuff, I'll never know." She set another box in the recycle pile.

Shelly opened the box in front of her. "Hey, look, I found some of your old report cards. And there's our first grade class picture."

They both stared at the small picture trying to identify the various students. "Is that Suzy Perkins? I wonder what ever happened to her?" Shelly said.

"I have no idea. I haven't seen her since graduation twelve years ago. There aren't many of us still in Bridgetown."

“Just us lucky ones.” Shelly laughed.

Shelly had married her high school sweetheart and had two adorable toddlers. She might be stuck in Bridgetown like Megan, but she had a life to show for it. What did Megan have?

“Where are your little ones today?”

“Jeff took them over to his mother’s for the day. We’re lucky to have her so close.” She looked at Megan. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring it up having parents nearby. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. I’m sure Mom is with Dad now. It’s just different with them both gone. I feel like an orphan.”

Shelly leaned over and gave her a hug.

Megan set aside another box of old receipts and got up to refill her coffee. She carried the pot into the living room and refilled Shelly’s also. “If you want any of the dishes or coffee cups, feel free to take what you want. The rest will be donated. I don’t have room for much in my apartment.”

“Okay. I’ll look through them before I leave. My kids break plates at record speed.” Shelly turned her attention back to the box which she had almost emptied. She pulled out an old, bent photo. “This is cute. Do you know who these kids are?” she handed it to Megan.

Megan stared at the picture of a boy and a girl in one of those pink, ride-in, Barbie cars. She turned it over in her hand to look at the back. “Hmm, it doesn’t say. I’m pretty sure the little girl is me, but I have no idea who the boy is.”

“Did you have one of those Barbie cars? I always wanted one.”

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t remember one. Must have belonged to one of the neighbors. Look, this is our cul-de-sac in front of this house. There were so many kids that lived here when I was little.”

“Do you want me to toss it?”

“No, I’ll hold onto it.” Megan stuffed it in her back pocket. She wasn’t sure why, but it intrigued her.

By the end of the afternoon, with Shelly’s help, they’d gone through all of the boxes in the living room and lugged the rest up from the musty basement. The piles had grown, especially the recycle and trash ones. They hadn’t found any valuable treasures, just the remnants of a long, normal life. Maybe that was all anyone could wish for.

Shelly stood and brushed off her jeans. “I need to get home and start

dinner. My crew will be home soon. Do you want to come eat with us?”

“No, I’m going to keep going here. The sooner I get this house cleaned out and put on the market, the better.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep it? Move back in?”

“No. Sally and Tom both suggested that, but it would feel like moving backward, not forward with my life. Besides, they both have kids, and I’m sure they could use their third of the proceeds. It’s best to just put it behind us and move on. Maybe I’ll use some of my money to take an exotic vacation.”

“Oh, that’s sounds nice. Where would you go?”

“I have no idea, but I’ll let you know.” She stood and hugged her friend goodbye and stared at the rest of the mess. Megan rarely regretted being single, but right now, she could have used a husband to help with the project. She turned back to the next box.

An hour later, she decided to call it a day. She picked up the small box of things she was saving, walked out the door, and locked it behind her.

“Megan, is that you?”

She turned to see Agnes Whittaker waving from her front porch next door. Agnes had lived there longer than her parents. Megan had no idea how old she was, but she’d seemed old when Megan was a child. She had to be pushing ninety. Megan walked over to say hello.

“How are you, Agnes?”

“Fit as a fiddle.” She smiled. “I’m so sorry about your mom. She was a wonderful neighbor.”

“Thank you.”

“What are you going to do with the place?”

“We’re selling. I’m just cleaning out Mom’s things.”

Agnes shook her head. “That’s a shame. You never know what kind of neighbors you’ll get. The young couple on the other side of me aren’t very friendly.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I suppose they’re just busy. I remember when you kids were little, and all the kids would play out in the cul-de-sac every evening in nice weather. I loved to watch all of you.”

“It was fun.” Suddenly, Megan remembered the photo in her pocket and pulled it out. “You wouldn’t happen to know who this is in the photo, would you?” She handed it to Agnes.

“Goodness, let me put on my readers.” She pulled a pair of smudged glasses out of her jacket pocket. “Well, isn’t that cute. You don’t know who it is?”

“I’m pretty certain the girl is me, but I have no idea who the little boy is.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell with me either. There were so many children who lived here. You might ask my son, Paul. He might remember. I’ve always said he has a photographic memory.”

Paul had been a couple of years older than Megan and had moved away after high school. She hadn’t seen him in years.

“Where is Paul, now?” She felt bad that she couldn’t remember. She was sure Mom had told her.

“Chicago. He works for an investment firm up there. He and his family will be in town for my birthday in two weeks. You could stop by and ask him then.”

Megan sighed and stuffed it back in her pocket. “Is there anyone else who lived here back then still here?” She glanced around the cul-de-sac.

“Not really. The Hendersons, over there in the blue house,” Agnes pointed across the street. They’ve been here a while, but I don’t remember exactly when they moved in. My brain’s not what it used to be.” Agnes chuckled. “They never were blessed with children though, so I doubt they’d know. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s not really important. I was just curious.”

“If I think of anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, I’ll be around a lot the next couple of weeks getting the house cleaned out. I’m sure I’ll see you again.” She turned toward her car.

“Bye, sweetie. It sure was good seeing you.”

“You, too.” Even after the house was sold, Megan needed to make a point to stop by and see Agnes. She deserved that.

After hitting a fast food drive-through, Megan carried the box into her small apartment which had never really felt like home. Now she was about to sell the only place that did. Where did she belong in this world? She pulled the photo out of her pocket and stuck it in the edge of her mirror along with several other photos she had from her childhood, before getting out of her dust-covered clothes and jumping in the shower. Another Saturday night would be spent in her pajamas, eating alone on her couch while she watched

some sappy movie on TV. It wasn't a bad life, just not the one she'd dreamed of. She wasn't even sure what the dream was anymore.

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FROM THE AUTHOR



Dear Readers,

Christmas is my favorite time of year. I love writing Christmas stories about second chances at happiness and romance. I hope you enjoyed reading this story about starting over.

I've called the beautiful state of Colorado home for over forty years. Although I live on Front Range, the mountains have always held my heart since my first adventure on a dude ranch when I was five years old. There's nothing like the calm of a mountain stream or the wind whistling through the pines or rustling aspen leaves to sooth one's soul. Whenever I need to relax, refresh, or get inspired I head to the mountains. There's nothing quite like the Rocky Mountains. Writing about life in them takes me back home. I hope it takes you to a peaceful place as well.

Although Pine Meadows and the country around it is a product of my imagination, it reflects the community spirit that exists in many small towns. I hope you love it as much as I do, and that you will continue to read my stories. **If you liked this book, please go to Amazon and leave a review.** Want to keep up on my latest books?

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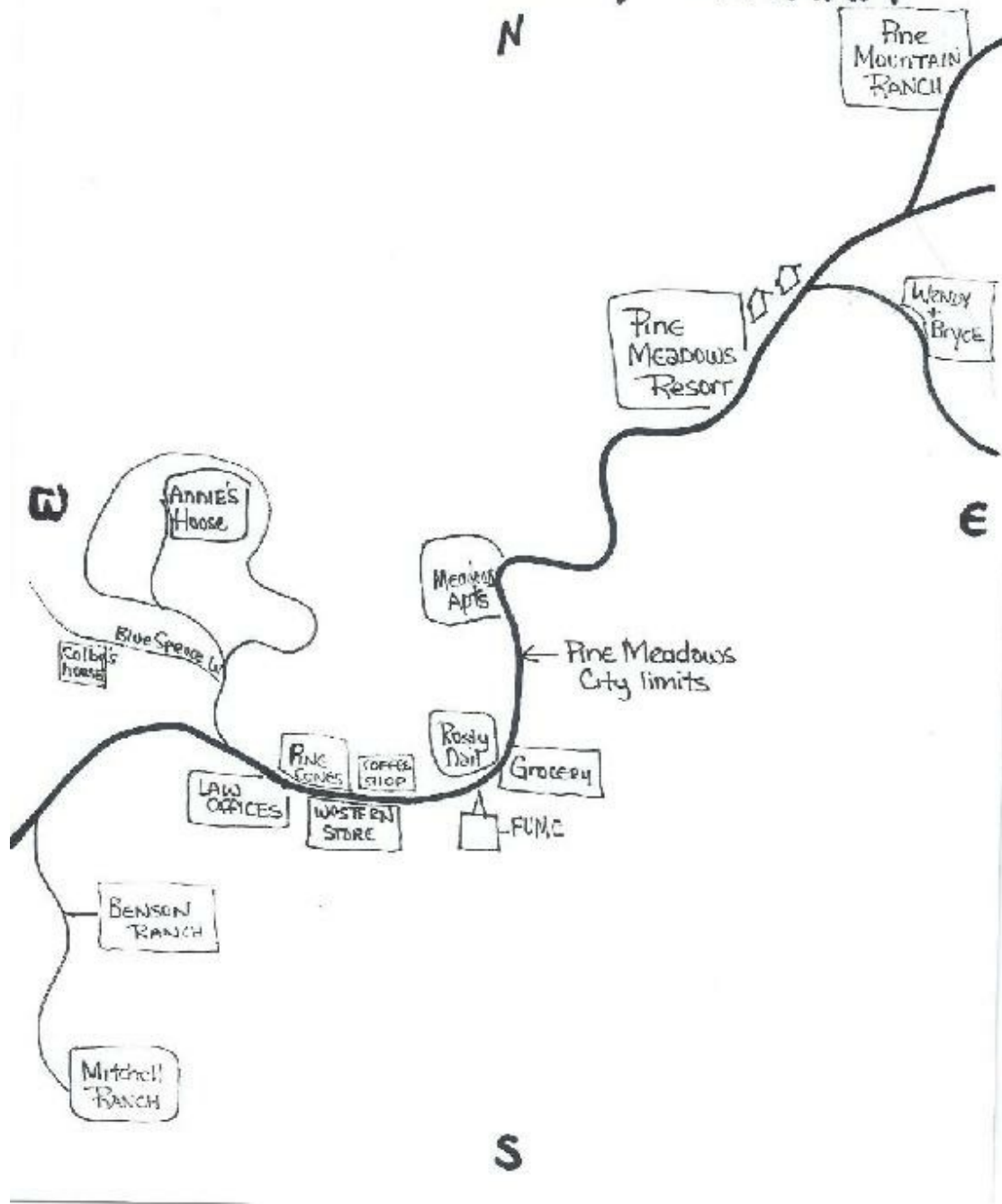
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PINE MEADOWS, MONTANA

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