



# Heart of the West

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**Category:** Romance, Western

**Description:** In the quiet town of Wolf Creek, Sheriff Effrem Reeves carries a legacy etched in the history of law enforcement, tracing his lineage back to the legendary Bass Reeves. The weight of five generations rests on his capable shoulders, and he's determined to honor the Reeves name.

Widowed, and married to the badge, Effrem's world gets turned upside down when he crosses paths with Ruby, a spirited baker with a heart bigger than the plate sized cinnamon rolls she makes. Ruby, on the cusp of her divorce being final, ventures to Wolf Creek to start a new life and open her dream bakery. However, her soon-to-be ex-husband is set on leaving her with nothing but shattered dreams.

Fate intervenes, drawing the two together when Effrem pulls Ruby over for speeding. He's instantly drawn to her and fights it with all his might. He's determined to stay faithful to the woman he loved and lost.

Can Effrem protect the town and uphold his family's legacy while also guarding his heart against the unexpected force of Ruby's presence? In Wolf Creek, where the echoes of the past meet the promises of the future, Sheriff Effrem Reeves and Ruby Cline are about to discover that sometimes, the most arresting moments happen, at the least expected time.

**Total Pages (Source):** 78

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Ruby

I'm pushing seventy-five in a sixty-five. I know I shouldn't, but I'm running late. Everything that could go wrong this morning had gone wrong. Now I'm running late to sign the deal at my new bakery. Well, it's just a building for now with an apartment over the top of it. It'll need a lot of elbow grease and TLC, but when I'm done, the place will shine.

I send up a quick prayer. Please let one thing go right today. No sooner than I finish the thought I see flashing lights in my rearview mirror. And here comes the sirens.

"Fuck my life," I yell out before turning on my signal and pulling over to the side of the road.

I send off a quick text realtor:

Unavoidable delay.

My sincerest apologies.

Will get there ASAP

Ruby xx

I need to remember to remove my automatic signature from the text. The xx was for

my ex. It's likely pretentious to sign off a text with your name anyway. Something Roger insisted on. His family's from money, riding on the much richer coattails of a distant cousin's last name. A knock on the window jars me out of my thoughts. I roll down my window.

"License and registration, please."

I reach into the glove box and get my license and registration before turning and getting a good look at the officer. He's perhaps the most handsome man I've ever seen. He'd be the perfect black James Bond. He's frowning.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Could you please repeat that? I'm a little rattled today."

Officer, I looked for his name tag, Reeves. Sheriff Reeves, to be exact. I gulp. Great. I ask for one good thing to happen and I get pulled over by the sheriff. The sheriff of the town I'm moving to.

"Ma'am, do you know how fast you were going?"

"Yes, sir. I'm so sorry. I don't normally speed, but I'm running late. I'm supposed to sign papers for my new place today. I couldn't find any boots. All my stuff is coming across the country in a truck that's now going to be a week late. I have to survive a week on what I have in my suitcase, which, by the way, is not a pair of boots."

I stop, mortified. I spewed all of that at Mr. Hot Cop. Uh, er, Hot Sheriff. It snowed this morning. And all I have is a pair of blue silk heels with straps. Thank God for the straps. According to everything I've read, it's unseasonably cold for Oklahoma. I'm from Indiana, and I was married to a wannabe ass hat. I've walked through ice and snow in heels.

“Running late is not an excuse to speed.” Mr. Hottie says with a stern look.

He has nice lips. I wonder what they’d feel like against mine. Ack! What’s wrong with me? You haven’t had sex in three years and he’s H-O-T hot. Thanks, snarky voice.

“I understand. I’m sorry, sir.”

“I’m giving you a warning. You only get one in my town, Mrs. Buffet. Make sure you don’t treat it like the Indy 500.”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry. I won’t speed again.”

“See that you don’t. Welcome to Wolf Creek.” He tips his hat and walks back to his truck.

I wait until he gets into his truck before I start the car and drive away, nerves riding me the entire way to town as he tails behind me. I hope he’s just headed in the same direction and not worried I’m going to put the pedal to the metal. I never speed. I knew I shouldn’t have. Now I’m later than I would’ve been had I went the speed limit. I hang my head a little in self-disgust as I pull in front of the store that’s soon to be mine.

The sheriff drives past me. I see him pull into a parking lot a block down and realize that’s where the police station is. I hurry out of my SUV and to the shop’s front door. I try the front door and let out a small sigh of relief when it pushes open. My handsome as sin realtor, Dustin Whitebear, smiles, gets up from one of the soda tables, and meets me halfway across the room.

“Ruby, so glad you could make it.”

“I am so very sorry I’m late. Murphy and all his laws visited me this morning.”

The look on Dustin’s face changes. “Sounds like you’ve had a rough go of it.”

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“To top it off, I got pulled over by, of all people, the Sheriff.”

“Oh my, you did have a rough morning. Let me take you to Molly’s for breakfast. We can sign the papers while you try their gingerbread pancakes.”

“I’d love a cup of coffee and gingerbread pancakes sound delish.”

“Come on. I’m parked out front.”

Dustin retrieves his briefcase and escorts me outside to the big red pickup truck I parked beside. He opens the door and offers his hand as I step up into the truck. I fasten my seatbelt while he goes around to the driver’s side.

“On a good day, Molly’s is only three blocks away. It’s too cold today.”

“The weather surprised me.”

Dustin smiles. “Surprised us too. We don’t get much ice and snow here, but we do get some. It’s usually January or February when that blows in.”

The few block drive goes quickly. Dustin parks right out front. We’re seated immediately by a young waitress named Sally. She escorts us to a booth and hands us menus.

“Good morning Dustin, you want coffee?”

“I do. Sally Anne, this is Ruby. She’s new in town.”

“Welcome to Wolf Creek, Ruby. What can I get you to drink?”

“Coffee please.” I look around the table and spot creamer and sugar.

Josh Turner’s Joy to the World plays softly in the background. I tap my toe to the beat and peruse the menu. As much as I want gingerbread pancakes. I’m trying to lose weight again. When Sally Anne returns, I order an egg white omelet with spinach, feta, and tomato and dry whole wheat toast.

Dustin looks at me with a raised brow. I shrug.

“Bakers have to taste test every batch. I’m trying to keep an extra helping of curves off my already generous portion.”

Dustin smiles at me. Then, with a wink says, “Mrs. Buffett if you don’t think me too forward, I think you’re stunning. When we conclude business, I’d love to take you out on a date. An actual date or a hope to be a new friend showing you the town. You can decide at the end of the evening, fair?”

Stunned, it took me a few moments to answer. “Fair.” I manage without stuttering.

This man is drop dead gorgeous, straight out of Native American Hunk magazine. Hunk, I wonder if that word is offensive now. I make a mental note to Google it.

“I’ll pick you up at eight. Wear something you can dance in. Where should I pick you up?”

“Unless the apartment above the space is move-in ready. I’d like a suggestion.” I knew it wasn’t, but asked anyway. Why not?

“No ma’am. It has some furniture but it’s not complete. It’s been unoccupied for two

and half years like the old bakery below. I'm excited to become a patron."

"What's your favorite?"

"These chewy chocolate pecan cookies. It's like chocolate pecan pie in a cookie. If it's done right, the outside has a crisp crust and a soft inside. Hard to do. I've found a few places outside my ikó. My grandmother. None of those places are local."

I smile at him. I know just the cookie and the secret. "I'll see what I can do. If you like them, I'll send some with you for your grandmother. Oh, and please call me Ruby. As you know, I won't be a Mrs. Much longer and Roger insisted I give him back his precious name." I laugh. "He can have it."

"What will your name be, and when does it change?"

"I'm taking my maiden name back, Cline, spelled with a C. It changes at twelve-o-one am on December twenty-fifth. Roger says it's a Christmas present to himself. I say it's mine. Honestly, I only hung on long enough to save for my future."

Dustin reaches across the table and puts his hand over top of mine. "There's a B&B at the Broken B, the Bennetts' Ranch. I'll call Cece and see if she can fit you in. Let's table Roger talk for tonight after I get a few drinks in you."

I laugh. "I like the way you think."

"If you don't mind. I'll make the call now. We can enjoy breakfast, then sign the papers after. I'm holding you on your word about those cookies."



## Page 3

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I hold up my fingers in a sign. "Scout's honor."

"You were a girl scout?"

"Ambassador Cline."

"I like that. Do you ride horses? Wait. Let me make that call. You're so easy to talk to."

"Thank you."

"I'm going to slip into the private dining room. It's empty this morning. I won't be gone long. If, by chance, the kitchen is extra fast, start without me. Maybe splurge and eat some of my fruit salad. It's huge."

I nod and smile again. I haven't smiled this much in, I can't remember when. I drink my coffee and enjoy the view as he walks away from the table.

## Chapter 2

Effrem

Just when I thought my day couldn't get any worse, some lady in a Beamer doing ten over on the way. Five over I'll give you, but ten with Indiana license plates? This county is not a raceway. I flip on my lights. Follow up with the sirens seconds later. To her credit, she finds a safe spot and pulls over immediately.

This is my day off. But deputy dingle-fucking-berry got drunk last night and has a case of the dry heaves so bad he can't leave his bed. His words, not mine. Dick. One more strike and he's out on his ass. I want to talk to Wilder Bennett about joining the force. He may never ride broncs again, but he'd make a great deputy. His PT is over next month. I know he's thrilled. I could get him in fighting shape, so to speak.

I get out and walk to the driver's side window.

"License and registration, please."

My mama taught me to always be polite to women. I study her as she leans over and reaches into the glove box. She's a very attractive redhead with curves that gets my motor running. I find myself wishing I was standing on the other side of the car so I can get a glimpse of what looks like a generous amount of cleavage. I shake the thoughts away. What's gotten into me? This is not who I am.

She finds what she's looking for quickly.

"Ma'am, do you know how fast you were going?"

She doesn't answer me. I'm about to clear my throat when I notice the tight way she holds her body and the worry around her eyes. I give her a few to gather thoughts.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Could you please repeat that? I'm a little rattled today."

I repeat what I said.

"Yes, sir. I'm so sorry. I don't normally speed, but I'm running late. I'm supposed to sign papers for my new place today. I couldn't find any boots. All my stuff is coming

across the country in a truck that's now going to be a week late. I have to survive a week on what I have in my suitcase, which, by the way, is not a pair of boots."

Sounds like her day has matched mine. I decide to give her a break before the adorable blush spreads across her cheeks.

"Running late is not an excuse to speed."

"I understand. I'm sorry, sir."

"I'm giving you a warning. You only get one in my town, Mrs. Buffet. Make sure you don't treat it like the Indy 500."

"Yes sir. I'm sorry. I won't speed again."

"See that you don't. Welcome to Wolf Creek." I tip my hat and walk back to the Ford.

I wait for her to pull out, then follow behind. I'm headed to town anyway. Let's see if she's telling the truth. She pulls into a parking space in front of the old bakery. I continue down the block to the station. I park out front and head in as soon as I get through the door. Trixie assaults me.

"Chief. It was Dingleman's day to get breakfast. Can you pick up from Molly's?"

"Sure. Give me the order."

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“It’ll take me a few to get everyone’s order.”

I head into my office and fire up the computer. I have enough time to skim the top of the reports before Trixie barges into my office.

“I have everyone’s order. I hope they don’t run out of gingerbread pancakes.”

“I don’t know why you all like that sweet stuff.”

“Not all of us eat healthy twenty-four-seven.”

I shrug, take the list, put back on my hat and coat, and head out the door. I decide to walk. It’s not that cold. My boots have plenty of treads and the city already has salted the sidewalks. The streets are getting busy as people head to work. Shops will open soon. Molly’s opens at three and closes at ten.

As soon as I enter the diner, I spot Ruby Buffet. She’s sitting across from Dustin Whitebear. The realtor story checks out. I wonder if she's going to buy the old bakery. Her car is parked in front of it. Sally Anne comes bouncing up to me.

“What can I do for you, Sheriff? Did you know there’s a new lady in town that’s buying the new bakery?”

“Is that fact? I have an order for the station.”

“Oh sure. Let me get right on that. Can I get you a cup of coffee?”

“Yes, you can.” I take a seat. Sally Anne pours the coffee and takes the order into the kitchen to give it to the cook. I already added my own omelet to the bottom of the order.

She quickly retrieves a mug and pours me a fresh cup of java. I inhale the rich scent before drinking. I take my coffee black. No need for all that shit. Sally Anne rattles on about the latest town gossip while I wait for the station’s order. I don’t know why the girl feels the need to fill me in on the town gossip. She should know I don’t cotton to that. I like facts, not rumors, hearsay, or innuendos. Then she said something that perked my ears.

“Can you believe she’s been in town less than an hour and Dustin’s already asked her out? I bet they go to Spotted Horse. They have the best steak in town, not to mention dancing. I love to dance.”

“Dustin doesn’t date married women.”

“Oh, that. I overheard her saying her divorce is final on Christmas Day. Can you believe her husband told her that was his Christmas present to himself? What a jerk.”

What a jerk indeed. Why the hell would you tell your wife that? Even if she’s a soon to be ex. That’s abusive shit right there. Intentional infliction of emotional pain. Makes me want to punch the fucker in the face. See if he likes intentional infliction of pain.

Dustin gets up to leave the booth. I see him slip into the private dining room with his phone out. Business call. I pick up my coffee and walk to her booth. I slid in across from her. Her face pales.

“No need to clutch your pearls, ma’am. Just thought I’d give you a friendlier welcome to town.” I offer my hand. “I’m Sheriff Effrem Reeves. Welcome to Wolf

Creek.”

She looks at me for a moment, then takes my hand. “Ruby Buffet, new in town.”

“Rumor has it you’re buying the old bakery.”

She looks stunned. “Wow, small town gossip really is fast. I haven’t even signed the papers yet.”

I nod my head. “Sally Anne there is faster than a speeding bullet for spreading the news. She’s not a hateful gossip, girl just can’t keep her mouth shut. Other than that, she’s a good kid.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“So, is the rumor true?”

She nods her head. “It is. I’m signing papers after breakfast. Mr. Whitebear was kind enough to have our meeting here. I’m famished.”

Her stomach growls in agreement with her statement. Pink colors her porcelain skin. She’s gorgeous, with deep red hair, and dark sapphire blue eyes.

Whitebear arrives back at the booth before we talk more. I get up, take my coffee with me. I nod at Whitebear.

“Whitebear.”

“Sheriff. How are you this morning?”

“Cranky. I should be home working at the ranch instead of filling in for Deputy

Dipshit.”

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“Him again?”

“Yeah. Kid’s a pain in the ass.”

“Hopefully he gets his head out of his ass before you fire it.”

“We’ll see. Don’t get your hopes up. See you around, Whitebear. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Buffet.”

Sally Anne came to the counter with two enormous bags filled with food.

“Here’s your order, Sheriff. See you around.”

I tip my hat, take the bags, and head back to the station.

### Chapter 3

#### Ruby

I can’t believe the bakery is mine. As soon as the papers are signed, Dustin drops me off at the bakery and hands me the keys. I go back in and look around the downstairs before heading up the inside stairwell to the apartment above.

Thirty minutes later, I have a thorough list of what I’ll need to get. It might take a few days for me to get all together. In the meantime, I’m staying at the Broken B. They have a bed-and-breakfast on the property and even offer ranch hand experience “vacations”. Maybe one day when the shop is running. I’ll take a two-day excursion



on the ranch. I've always loved riding. My best friend's family had horses. Since most of my time at their house, I learned to ride.

Most of my list can wait for later, however I need something to wear tonight and a pair of boots. I drive down Main street and look at the storefronts. A few blocks from me is a store called Calico Gypsy. I find a space, park the Beamer and head inside. Roger bought the car for the prestige. I like the reliability but I need a bigger car. I need to drive to Tulsa and trade it in for a bigger SUV. Maybe a Tahoe or a Yukon. I'll have to see what kind of deal I can get. Shouldn't be an issue. Even used, I have the more expensive vehicle.

I'll look up the value later. Maybe I should ask Dustin if there's a reputable car dealership closer.

The door tinkles with the sound of a dozen tiny bells. A woman in her mid-thirties with long dark hair greets me.

"Welcome to Calico Gypsy. Is there something I can help you find?"

"I'm new in town and got caught unexpectedly by the weather. I need a pair of boots and a dress for tonight?"

"Where are you going, so I know what style?"

"Spotted Horse."

"It's a nice place. Kinda dance bar and steakhouse combined. I think I have the perfect dress for you and I have several pairs of Old Gingo boots on sale right now. We're making room for the new season."

"Excellent. Please point me in their general direction."

“Right over there to the left, past the purses.”

I followed her direction to the wall of the boots. After trying on several pairs, I decided on a three-quarter height cowboy boot. They’re black with a pink butterfly on the back and front. It’s done in a feminine style, but not ultra-girly. I’ll be forty in a few years. I don’t want to wear boots made for a teenager.

Bonus, they were on sale for half off. The saleswoman finds me with several items in hand. She shows me to the dressing room. I try on everything and settle for a border print maxi dress with a high-low hem. The three-quarter length sleeves mimic the dress’s hem. I find a pair of silver earrings and a matching necklace, both marked down. The dress is on sale as well.

I bring my purchases to the counter. The woman smiles at me.

“I’m Gypsy, by the way. Welcome to Wolf Creek.”

“Thank you, Gypsy. I’m Ruby. This is my first day in town. I’m headed to the Broken B next, but forgot to ask Mr. Whitebear for directions. Maps has led me astray once too often.”

“Dustin Whitebear?”

“Yes.”

“He’s our best realtor. Are you plannin’ on staying awhile?”

“I am. I bought the old bakery. There’s an apartment above, but it needs a little work.”

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“Please tell me you’re going to open another bakery. We’re in dire need of one around here. It’s a food desert. I’d die for key lime pie and real sourdough bread.”

“I hadn’t thought about adding bread to the list. Do you think they’d be worth the effort and expense?”

Willow’s face lights up. “Yes! A bakery. Yes, I believe so. None of the local markets carry fresh baked bread. It might be such a hit you need to add an employee or two. Or perhaps a waiting list.” She adds the last with a laugh.

“I have a friend with a hundred-year-old sourdough starter. When I’m ready to test recipes, I’ll ask him to send some.”

“Omigod, I think I love you.”

I laugh.

“I’m giving you an extra twenty-five percent discount today.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Let me ring you up and I’ll write the directions down for you. That way, you’ll have them until you’ve been a few times.

I nod. “Yes. Thank you again. Everyone is so welcoming.”

“It’s a friendly town. You’ll get to know everyone soon. The last owner didn’t go out

of business. She passed and no one in her family wanted to run the bakery.”

“Oh, that’s so sad. Looks like I have big shoes to fill.”

“I volunteer for tribute. I’ll taste test anything you want.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

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Gypsy gave me easy to follow directions.

I find myself pulling down the long driveway. When I pass the half-mile marker, I wonder if I’ve taken a wrong turn. The note does say “loooooong” driveway. I keep going another quarter a mile before I see what can only be described as a log mansion. I take a right and go another half mile before the Bed andBreakfast comes into view. It’s an elegant old Victorian done in creams and blues.

I pull into a designated parking space. Before my car is turned off, a lanky young man comes out. He tips his hat and opens my door.

“Mrs. Buffet?”

“That’s me.”

“My name is Jack. Can I take your luggage? Mrs. Bennett has you in the Belle Starr suite. She’s waiting for you in the parlor with some refreshments. I’ll take you there.”

I unlock the back of the SUV and step aside to allow the young man to gather my luggage. I have three days to get the apartment in order. I sold most of my expensive wardrobe to pad my bank account. I don’t get anything until the divorce is final and I

fought tooth and nail to get what little I did. The prenup mysteriously changed the wording and my signature appeared on something I never signed. That's a story for another day. I sigh, weary from the thought of dealing with all of Roger's BS.

I follow Jack into the house, past the well-appointed foyer and into a Victorian style parlor. A woman maybe a decade over my own thirty-eight years sits inside. She has long strawberry blonde hair and warm brown eyes. She rises to greet me.

"Mrs. Buffett?"

"That's me," I say with a smile.

"I'm Cecilia Bennett. Please call me Cece."

"Pleasure to meet you, Cece. Please call me Ruby."

"Ruby, I have tea set up for us."

I look at the cart beside the small table for two. A teapot, a tiered tray filled with sweets, and a small platter of finger sandwiches sits on top of it. I follow Cece to the table, accepting her offer of a cup of steaming hot tea. I add a finger sandwich and some sweets to my plate.

"What brings you to our sleepy little town?" she asks.

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“I bought the old bakery. I’m planning to open a new one.”

“Oh good. I really miss the old one. Are you making bread too? I’d die for an old-fashioned pumpernickel.”

I laugh. “You’re the second person to ask me that today. It’s not in my original plan, but I’m going to try it out in the bakery. I love baking bread.”

“When do you think you’ll open?”

“I’m planning on opening the first of January. That gives me a little over three weeks to make the minor modifications and test bake everything I want to start with.”

“If you need taste testers, we have plenty around here. Besides my husband and seven sons, we employ a couple dozen cowboys and a few cowgirls.”

“Wow, you must have a large spread.”

“A hundred and seventy thousand acres. We run both horses and cattle.”

“I’d love to see some of the ranch sometime.”

“Do you ride?”

“I do. I love horses. I’m fortunate my best friend had horses and her family had me over often. enough, they could’ve claimed me on their taxes.”

Cece laughs. “You’re welcome to ride here as often as you’d like. We board for family and friends.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you. I’m in the middle of a divorce. It’ll be a minute before I have extra income. When I do, I’d love to take you up on your offer.”

We speak for another twenty minutes before she has to take a call. I follow the directions she gave me to the Belle Starr room. Belle is a famous Old West outlaw from Oklahoma. Though her home base is a couple hours south of Wolf Creek in Porum, Oklahoma. The room has a king-size canopy bed with a chaise lounge in front of it. A large antique dresser and a large overstuffed chair. A Tiffany standing lamp is next to the chair. The room is done in creams and golds.

I walk into the bathroom and immediately fall in love. It boasts a claw-foot tub and a walk-in shower that's enclosed in glass. I decide right then that I'm going to enjoy a long, hot soak before my date tonight.

## Chapter 4

Effrem

Trixie made the rounds delivering everyone’s breakfast order while I went into my office for some peace.

I make quick work of my breakfast, including my egg white omelet and porterhouse. I hate coming in on my days off. It puts me behind at the ranch. Running the Sheriff’s office and a working ranch keeps my hands full at all times.

At least I’ll have time to catch up on paperwork. The bane of my existence. An hour into paperwork, a call comes over the dispatch.

“We’ve got a 14:35.3 at the Arnold residence.”

No address needed for that call. I grab my hat and head out.

“Trixie, send an ambulance to the Arnolds’,” I say as I jog past.

One of these days, I know that low life is going to kill Bitsy. We’ve all tried to get her to leave him. He has her so convinced she can’t live without him. She lives as his punching bag. He disgusts me enough to contemplate putting a bullet in his head and being done with it. There are times I wish times were more like my four times great grandfather Bass’. Being a lawman in many ways was much simpler than today.

I hate seeing criminals on the street, but I refuse to break the law to put them behind bars. It takes less than five minutes to make the ten-minute drive. I can hear her screaming as soon as I exit the vehicle. I dash to the front door and kick it in, gun drawn.

“Wolf Creek Sheriff’s department, get down on your hands and knees.”

As I come through the door, the first thing I see is Heath Arnold with a bloody knife poised to strike.

“Drop the knife.”

His hand arcs down and I put two in him. I hear two of my deputies identify themselves before they rush in the room.

“Call an ambulance and the coroner,” I say to my second-in-command, Deputy Sheriff Buck Bennett.



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“Jeffries, grab the first aid kit,” I say, rushing to Bitsy’s side.

She’s covered in blood and screaming hysterically.

“You killed him! You killed him.”

“Bitsy, I need you to calm down so I can assess your injuries.”

She beats my hands away. Buck joins me a minute later.

“Let me try.” I nod, stand up and move out of the way.

I move out of her vision and start looking through the kit. I take out a couple clot packs. I hand them to Jeffries, who is bent down beside Buck. Sirens in the distance tell me the ambulance will arrive in about two minutes. I watch Buck and Jeffries patch up the worst of the stab wounds. There are too many for me to count amongst the blood.

She’s gone deathly pale by the time the ambulance arrives.

“Jeffries, escort the ambulance to the hospital. I’ll stay here for the coroner.”

The coroner's office will be here within the hour. Buck waits with me until everyone is gone.

“Effrem, you know the drill,” he says when we’re alone.

I nod. "I do." I hand him my service weapon. He bags it and slides it inside his coat to take to the lab.

"It shouldn't take long. The case is open and closed. He was in the process of stabbing his wife to death when you broke down the door."

"He was. I told him to drop the knife. He moved to stab her again."

"Shae is out of town until Thursday. I suspect she'll have you cleared by Friday afternoon. Enjoy your time at the ranch."

I snort. "You'll have to ride Deputy Dipshit's ass."

He chuckles. "I can do that, and harder than you, since I'm just filling in. He can come whining to you when you get back."

"Too bad he's not related. He could use a good kick in the ass before he gets his ass kicked off the force."

"I'll feel bad for his Ma when he does."

"Think it's inevitable?"

"Don't you?"

"Yeah, but like you, I hate it for his Ma Dingleman. Bad enough she had to live with that worthless piece of cow dung that gave her a last name before he ran off with the cocktail waitress. She's done the best she can with the boy."

"When the day comes, you've done your best. She'll know that."

The arrival of the coroner cuts off any further conversation.

“Effrem, what do we have?”

“Two gunshot wounds to the chest, Dave.”

I watch as Dave takes in the scene.

“I take it all this blood doesn’t belong to Heath?”

“Most of it is Bitsy’s.”

Dave swore. “Is she alive?”

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“When the ambulance took her away. Jeffries hasn’t updated us yet.”

Buck and I stay while Dave does his thing. We tape off the residence and leave. I climb back into the truck and head home. Buck will fill Trixie in. What a cluster fuck of a day.

### Chapter 5

#### Ruby

I’m downstairs in the lobby fifteen minutes before seven, waiting for Dustin to pick me up. Nervous, I pop into the hall half-bath and check my appearance one last time. I went with a nude lip and smokey eyes tonight. I’m more than a little giddy. I haven’t been on a date since I was in highschool. How crazy is this? Butterflies dance in my stomach. I do the breathing exercise my therapist taught me. A few deep breaths later, I’ve calmed my nerves enough to leave my hidey hole.

Dustin is standing in the foyer, a single rose in his hand. He smiles when he sees me.

“You look amazing,” he says, handing me the rose.

“Thank you.”

I take him in. He’s dressed in crisp black jeans and a black, long sleeve, pearl button snap shirt with turquoise trim. With it, he wears a silver and turquoise bolo tie and a black jacket. Boots and a matching hat complete his outfit. His long hair is in two braids with silver and turquoise fasteners near the end.

My mouth waters a little, taking him all in.

“You look pretty amazing yourself,” I add.

He smiles. “Thank you. I hope you’ve brought your appetite. They have the best steak in the West, in my humble opinion.”

“I had a busy day. I’m starving.”

Dustin places his hand in the small of my back and guides me outside to his truck. He helps me up like last time, closing the door before getting into the driver’s side. The drive doesn’t take long. Dustin keeps the conversation light. So far, so good. When he parks, he comes around and opens my door, helping me out of the truck.

As before, he places his hand on the small of my back and guides me into the restaurant. The hostess takes us to a booth and leaves our menus.

“Would you like a starter?” Dustin asks.

“Only if you choose. It all looks good and you’ve been here before.”

He chuckles. “Fair enough. How about seared diver scallops and smoked buffalo sausage?”

“Sounds amazing.”

When our server comes, Dustin orders appetizers and a bottle of Malbec. I love red wine. I choose a chop salad and sauteed spinach to go with my buffalo ribeye. Spotted Horse has beef, buffalo, venison and wild boar. Along with chicken and seafood. Dance music is playing. There are a few couples on the dance floor. Maybe later, after dinner, I’ll see if Dustin wants to take a spin or two around the dance floor.

It's been ages since I've been dancing.

My salad is superb with bacon, chopped eggs, tomato, blue cheese and sharp cheddar cheese. The buffalo steak, my first time having one, is sheer perfection.

"How did you pick Wolf Creek, Oklahoma, of all places?"

I blush. "I, uh, actually threw a dart on the map and landed in northeast Oklahoma. From there, I did a little research and found the bakery."

"Have you always wanted to own a bakery?"

"For the longest time. Roger didn't like his wife working outside the home. He said it made him look cheap. Like he couldn't afford to pay for everything himself."

"No offense meant, but your husband sounds like a dick."

"No offense taken. He is that's why he's a soon to be ex. I've never wanted Christmas to get here this much since I was a little girl."

"His loss is Wolf Creek's gain."

"What made you decide to become a realtor?"

"My aunt is in the business. I started working with her company before starting one of my own. She still has the company down in Edmond."

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“That’s nice. Is your family from Edmond?”

“The Edmond, Oklahoma City area.”

“Would it be rude if I ask what tribe you're from?”

His smile widens. “Not at all. I’m Osage. If you’ve ever wanted to go to a Pow Wow, we do one big one for each season. The winter one is coming up near the end of January. We hold it the Saturday closest to the wolf moon.”

“Why do they call it a wolf moon?”

“Because more wolves howl during the month of January than the other months. Or so the legend goes.”

“That’s fascinating.”

We continue small talk throughout dinner, which is delicious. When we’re done, I’m stuffed.

“How do you feel about strawberries and cream for dessert?” Dustin asks.

“I love strawberries and vanilla ice cream. Can we take a dance or two to make room for dessert?”

“Absolutely,” he says with a wide smile, showing off his perfect white teeth.

We actually dance through four songs before I call it. New boots and I'm out of practice. The rest of the evening is wonderful. Dustin is fun and attractive, and he asks me out for a second date after dropping a quick kiss on my cheek when he drops me off. I wonder if he's being polite or if I'm already in the friend zone. Either way, I'll enjoy going out with him again. Never hurts to make new friends. And if it becomes more? Well, I won't complain.

## Chapter 6

Effrem

Delaney McRae, my housekeeper, set a bowl of steel-cut oats with fresh berries in front of me.

"Have you heard about the inquiry yet?"

I shake my head. "It's only six in the morning, Dee. Shae's office doesn't open until nine. Even if she clears me today, it'll be Monday before I'm back at the sheriff's office."

"Well, she needs to hurry. You're as prickly as a bear who rolled in a cactus bed."

She's not wrong, but the reason I've been prickly has more to do with a certain redhead than the upcoming inquiry. I had no doubt I'd be cleared and back to work on Monday morning. The extra time on the ranch allowed me to catch up on paperwork and fence mending. I don't know why I can't get Ruby Buffet out of my mind. I haven't been attracted to another woman since my Evie passed.

Sixteen long years and it still seems like yesterday I heard her laugh and saw her beautiful smile. It also feels like a lifetime ago. My phone rings. I look down to see Jessi. My middle child is calling.



“Hey, J.”

“Hi, Dad. Have either of my siblings claimed you for Christmas?”

“No, I was hoping you would all come home this year.”

“I’d love to, but there are too many exams.”

“You can’t study here?” I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

“I can, Dad but I want to introduce you to someone special. Him and his family. And before you panic, no plans for anything super serious, like forever until after college. We’ve been dating for a few months and I like him. More than I’ve liked anyone.”

Jessi never spoke this long unless it was about a case or a professor. She sounds like she’s over the moon.

“When and where, peaches?”

“Dad. Please don’t call me that in front of Kai.”

“Kai, is that your young man’s name?”

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“It is. Can you fly in on the twenty-first and stay until the twenty-sixth or the twenty-seventh?”

“Where am I flying to?”

“Either White Plains or La Guardia. White Plains is closest to Darien, where his parents live.”

“Am I staying in a hotel?”

“Mr. and Mrs. King would like you to stay in their home. Kai is an only child. He says they have tons of room. Their house is on ten acres. Nothing compared to your thirteen hundred, but the neighbors won’t be up our butts.”

“Do you want to make the flight reservations, or do you want me to?”

“I can, Dad. Thank you. I’m so excited. Don’t worry about Christmas presents. You just gave me the best gift. I love you.”

“I love you too, peaches. Text me the info on the flight.”

“I’ll send you a link to the tickets.”

I look at Dee. I know she heard at least my side of the conversation.

“Looks like you and Clay have two weeks off this year. Why don’t you take a vacation from me? As a bonus. Neither of you have left this ranch for over four days

for over a decade.”

Dee straightened her spine, pinning me with a look. “You needed me.”

I nod. “I did. I do, but I’m leaving the state. Clay can choose who he wants to put in charge. They’ll get additional pay for pulling holiday duty, as always.”

“I’ll talk to Clayton. I won’t make any promises. We’ll pay for our own vacation.”

I don’t argue with her. I’ll pay. Not only that, I’ll book it for them and send them off before either of them can come up with a reason. I finish breakfast and head to my office. I have a few things to do before I plan on saddling Duke, my trusty gelding, and taking a ride up to the ridge. First thing I do is power the laptop on. Once that’s done, I head to Dee’s Facebook and Pinterest pages. I know she’ll have a dream vacation listed somewhere.

A little less than an hour later, I have a two-week all-inclusive cruise with airfare booked. I’ll get a Christmas card later and put the plans inside. Dee might turn me down, but I’m betting she won’t turn down the cruise. Satisfied I’ve taken care of my best employment and long-time friends, I move on to calling my two sons and letting them know I’m spending Christmas in Connecticut.

I’m shaking my head by the time I’m finished with the last call to my youngest son, Clyde. Jessi already had their flights to La Guardia booked. Personally, I’d rather fly into White Plains. It’s closer. Finished with my office chores, I grab my hat and jacket and head to the greenhouse.

Evie loved flowers and wanted them all year long. For our tenth anniversary, I had a small greenhouse built for her. She got her year round flowers. A pang hits my heart when I walk through the doors. I hired someone to take care of it these days. The smell of the flowers always reminds me of her. Along the back wall is a large patch

of wildflowers. I make my way to them and cut a large bouquet, securing it with bailing twine. I head to the barn.

I saddle up Duke, my 16HH dappled Appy. He's been on this trip so many times the last dozen years he can do it without my guidance. Swinging a leg up over, I settle on the saddle, bouquet in my hand. I ride him out of the barn and into the nearest field.

"To the ridge, Duke," I say, steering him in that direction.

Snow blankets still blankets the ground. Looks like early winter is staying. The kids would love snow at Christmas time. Too bad none of them will be home this year. The place is getting lonely with all the kids gone. Two in college and one already living his life. He's thirty-three and still hasn't settled down. I'm beginning to wonder if he ever will.

Evie and I married the day after she graduated high-school. She was seventeen and I was eighteen. We waited to have our first child until she was twenty-one. We were married twenty-one beautiful years before the accident.

The ride takes twenty minutes. I enjoy the scenic view as we move through the pasture and into the tree line.

Wolf Creek is uncommonly hilly for Oklahoma. We have a mountain range nearby that rivals the Glass Mountains. The surrounding areas have more hills and valleys than most of the state. Duke doesn't seem to notice the gradual incline as we make our way to the ridge.

I hop off, tie him off to a tree and walk over to Evie's grave. I dust off the snow before laying the flowers on top of the gravesite. I hunker down in front of her stone, tracing my fingers over the edge, pondering my next words.

“I’m sorry it’s been a few weeks, Ev. Things are crazy in town. We’ve had an unusual uptick of crimes, keeping me on my toes. I had to shoot a man on Monday, Ev. I’d like to say it was hard, but it wasn’t. He was going to kill his wife. He’d already stabbed her before I got there.

“I’ve been trying to get Bitsy to leave him for years. She made excuses and stayed. I’m not blaming her. Having never been in her shoes, I don’t understand. I’ll never understand a man’s desire to put his hands on a woman. To me, you’re not a man if you raise your hand to a woman, child or animal. There are so many ways to take care of things without resorting to that. I’d often hoped he would put up a fight when I took him in. I wanted nothing more than to land a few good punches in that asshole’s face. While the world is a better place without him in it. I still hate when a life is taken.

“Ev, I don’t know how to say this, but our little girl is growing up.”

Tears prick at my eyes as my emotions swell, thinking about doing this without the love of my life.

“She wants me to meet a boy. Not only a boy, but his parents, too. Swears it’s not forever, at least not until she’s done with school.”

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I chuckle. “She’s so much like you. She sees something and goes after it. I don’t know how I’m going to be mother and father of the bride, but I’ll get it done. I know you’re with me. I feel you sometimes when I’m asleep. It’s like I expect to find you when I wake up and roll over, but your side of the bed is cold and empty. Sixteen years later, and it still feels the same. I’m putting one foot in front of the other to get the kids through this life. I’m doing my best to make sure they have a happy life. A life that you would have wanted for them. The lives we talked about for them. All three of them.”

My phone rings. I stand up, a soft curse leaving my lips. Pulling it out of my back pocket, I see it’s from Internal Affairs.

“Reeves here.”

“Sherriff, It’s Shea Lane. See you first thing Monday. Come by my office, sign the papers clearing your name and report to duty.”

“Are you coming in early?”

“No, you’re coming in late.”

“I’ll see you at nine.”

I disconnect the call and put the phone back in my pocket.

“Looks like I’ll be back in the saddle Monday, my love.”

I press my fingers to my lips, kissing them before putting my fingers against Evie's name.

"I love you, Evie Jayne."

## Chapter 7

### Ruby

The first week of bakery ownership is a complete blur. I've cleaned, scrubbed and polished everything to the nth degree. This morning I'm going to make a few test batches. First thing I'm making is Dustin's cookies. I call them hot chocolate cookies. I'm not sure if that's what his grandmother calls them or not.

I put the first batch in the oven two minutes ago. Now I just have to decide what I'm going to make to go with them. I thought I'd deliver a small platter to Dustin's office, Calico Gypsy, and the police station. Try as I might, I can't get the sheriff out of my head. Not to mention he's started in a few pornographic dreams this week.

I don't understand. Dustin is a walking, talking orgasm, and I can't get the sheriff out of my head. Something about his beautiful umber skin and eyes that could peer right into your soul had my head all in a tither. My panties grow damp thinking about those lips. They look so kissable surrounded by snow white, closely shaven facial hair. It's more than stubble and less than a full-beard. I don't know what you call it. I know it's sexy as fuck.

I pause, thinking I heard a sound. I take a few moments to realize someone is knocking on the door. I have brown paper up on the windows until the big reveal on opening day. As I walk through the dining area, I take in all the changes. The walls are cream with blue trim. The lighter color makes the space look light and airy. I traded in the old tables and chairs for new ones. I still have a few soda tables, but most

are square four tops. Blue and cream gingham curtains hung at the big window. I'll pull them back during open hours.

Paintings of the local landscapes I found at a secondhand store brighten up the walls. I replaced the wall fixtures with sconce lights with frosted hurricane style lamps and installed new Eco bulbs in the overhead lights. Roger is a cheapskate with home decor. He wanted our home to look like everyone else's but didn't want to pay an interior designer or the full retail price. I took online classes in interior design and looked far and wide to find deals.

His snooty friends' wives raved over my old house and even begged me to give them the number of my interior designer. Roger didn't want anyone to know, so I'd have to shake my head and lie. They probably think I'm a bitch. That doesn't matter. Not one of them has contacted me since Roger and I separated.

I unlock the front door and pull it open to find an older gentleman. He's my height. I'd guess late-seventies with a full head of white hair and a full white beard and mustache.

"Mornin'. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

I open the door wide. "Not at all. Please come in. Is there something I can help you with, Mr...?"

His wide smile shows perfect white teeth. He offers his hand to me. "Dutch McGraw. Folks call me Dutch. I'm here to offer my help to you, or rather my goods."

He chuckles when he notices my puzzled face. I suck at poker. I don't wear my emotions on my sleeve. I wear them on my face. Try as I might, I've never learned the art of schooling my face.



“If you’ll humor me, Mrs. Buffet. I have a few things in my truck. Something the Mrs. put together to welcome you to town.”

“Of course, Dutch. Please, call me Ruby,” I say with a smile.

I don’t need to ask how he knows my name. It’s a small town and he’s not the first resident to welcome me. I already know the favorite pastry of at least two dozen town residents. I don’t mind. It makes deciding what to make easier. I can make town favorites and try some new ideas at the same time. I have them all written in a notebook; I take it with me everywhere.

I hurry to the kitchen to grab my notebook and pen before sitting it at a table and heading to the airport. I’ve taken to filling it for the last few days. I’m already in love with this town and its residents. It’s far from Indianapolis, Indiana, my old hometown. It was once the twelfth largest city in the nation. It slipped a few notches.

Perhaps all the pretentious snobs in Roger’s and his family’s circle ran off more people than I realized. I chuckle, blaming them for single-handedly reducing the population of the city.

Dutch comes back through the door with a huge gift basket as I place two cups of coffee on the table along with the sugar and creamer. He smiles at me.

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“Did you put chicory in this batch?”

I nod as I laugh. Small town. “I did. It’s been a hit with my visitors.”

The oven’s timer goes off.

“Please, excuse me, Dutch. I don’t want to burn the cookies.”

I spin on my heel and hurry off before he could answer. I’m intent on making these cookies perfect. I take the trays out of the oven and slide them onto the cooling rack. I’ll put the Christmas pinwheels next. I already have Santa cookies baked, iced, and in storage until I’m ready to make boxes. On a whim, I grab the spatula and place a few of the warm cookies on a plate.

Dutch is sitting at the table drinking coffee. He smiles when he sees me nodding his head toward the plate.

“Is that what smells so good?”

“This and the Santa cookies I made earlier. You’re my earliest visitor.”

He nods his head. “They wait to sample things.” I laugh again. I’ve laughed more since I arrived in Wolf Creek than the last decade plus of my life.

“I enjoy their feedback. It makes running a successful business a little easier.”

I sit the plate of cookies in front of him along with a stack of napkins.

“Please, try one and tell me what you think. I made them for Dustin. Says he can never find them outside his family.”

Dutch smiles. “Thank you, I’d love to, and please keep the chicory. It really adds flavor to the coffee.”

“Thank you.”

He hands me the gift basket after sitting two cookies on a napkin. I take the basket, curious to see what’s inside.

“Thank you, Dutch. Please tell Mrs. McGraw thank you.”

He smiles and nods. “I’ll enjoy these while you look.”

I ?carefully untie the ribbon from the deep red cellophane. It’s thick enough that I can’t see inside the basket. The cellophane opens like a flower before falling to the side, revealing the basket’s contents. A half-gallon sized glass jar catches my eyes. I lift it from the basket. It’s honey. I can’t wait to taste it. The next thing I spot is a two-gallon sized white plastic food container. I take it out next before opening it. Small bright red globes stare back at me. Cherries. My mind whirls with the possibilities.

Next, I take out a pint of jam. Likely cherry and a small plate filled with fried pies.

“These cookies are delicious. My Ellie made those fried pies with our own NorthStar cherries and local honey. The hives are set up in the cherry orchard. She used the infused honey today. There’s a smaller jar of it in the basket.”

“Do you mind if I try one now?”

He shakes his head. “Please do. These cookies are delicious, by the way. Might even be better than Ewa’s. That’s Dustin’s gran. He’ll love those cookies.”

“Please, have some more,” I say, before taking a bite of a fried pie.

An explosion of tart cherries bursts across my taste buds before the delicate cherry infused honey coats my tongue.

“Oh, my goodness! These are incredible. Think Ellie will work for me?” I ask with a snort. I crack myself up sometimes.

Dutch chuckles. “She might take you up on that a couple days a month. That woman gets bored at home, then goes shopping. I snuck a truckload of boxes to the donation center last week.”

“I’ll keep her in mind as soon as I can afford to hire someone for even a day a month. This is really incredible. The dough is flakey, the tartness of the cherries paired with that cherry blossom honey is phenomenal.”

“I’m so happy you like them. Would you like to buy some cherries and honey from us?”

“How much do you have?”

A blush spread across his cheeks. “I have found no one to take the crops the last several years. We freeze dry the older crops to keep the cherries edible. The last two years are like what I brought today. We’re happy to offer a discount on both the old crops and the new ones.”

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“Let me try out a few recipes. It’s the only way I’ll know how much I need to make batches for the bakery. If I can make anything from the raw material taste even half as good as this pie, I’ll be your number one customer.”

He smiles. “Our only customer. At our age. The cherries and honey were a hobby we shared with a friend who owned a bakery.”

I smile and nod. “I have a feeling we’ll be doing business together for the foreseeable future. Orders might be slow at first, depending on how popular the bakery is.”

“If these cookies are any indication. You’ll have them out the door and around the block. Rumor has it you’re making bread, too.”

“Yes, I’m trying sourdough, sandwich loaf, and one or two others to start.”

“My Ellie makes some mean pumpernickel. You might even talk her out of the recipe.”

“I’d love that. Thank you so much for the warm welcome, Dutch.”

We spent the next twenty minutes talking before Dutch hurried home to Ellie. Maybe one day...I think wistfully before hurrying back to the kitchen.

## Chapter 8

Effrem

After I take care of Duke, I take another shower, dress in fresh clothes and head into the office. I can't report for duty until Monday morning, but I can grab messages and check in, now that I'm officially cleared. I park the truck in my spot. It's a blacked out F250 Tremor Dually. Seized it in a raid a few years ago. Sent it to the shop for the boys to supe up. She's a helluva beast.

Trixie dressed in the ugliest Christmas sweater I've seen to date. It's such a train wreck. My eyes can't make sense of it.

"Afternoon Sheriff. I thought you'd be in today. Left something for you on your desk."

"Thanks, Trixie. Colorful sweater."

She lights up like a Christmas tree. "Thanks Chief."

She has half the deputies deputies and nearly all the office staff calling me chief. I shake my head and continue to my office. It's unlocked. A plate on the desk holds two fried pies. My mouth waters. Ellie McGraw must have dropped them by.

I slide into my seat, grabbing the first pie. I take a huge bite. The familiar taste of tart cherry and honey hits my taste buds seconds before it registers something new; black pepper, and some kind of sweet cheese. It's good, but the original is my favorite. I polish off the first one and bite into the second one. If heaven is a bite, this is it. Who would have thought black pepper would make such a difference? The black pepper in the cherry-honey pie is amazing.

I walk out of the office. "Any more of those pies left?"

"I'm not sure. Tray is in the breakroom. The silver tray has the ones with cheese in them."

“When did Ellie stop by? Was Dutch with her?”

Trixie shook her head. “Ruby brought them along with a bunch of other things for us to taste test.

“That was nice of her.”

“I swear half the town has already knocked on the bakery door for free samples and to request their favorites.”

“The bakery’s been missed. People are excited we’re getting a new one.”

“And she’s making bread. We’ll have honest to goodness fresh bread.”

I didn’t say anything. Dee made fresh bread at the house regularly.

“Seems she’s already a hit.”

“I hope so. I’d hate to go back home to Indiana.”

I almost ask how she knows where Ruby is from but I’m familiar with the small town gossip network. It spreads faster than California wildfires in the summer.

“Once she gets started, you can put in a standing order for Mondays and Fridays again.”

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Trixie squeals. “You’re the best, chief.”

I shake my head. I’m at the door to the breakroom when I hear dispatch get a call. Wilder Bennett is mopping the floor with a bunch of out of towners. I pop my head into dispatch.

“I’ll take it, Jo.”

Jo Ellen turns, surprised to see me.

“Sheriff, I didn’t know you were back.”

“I’m not officially. I’ll get Wilder and take him back to his house, provided he doesn’t start the fight.”

“He never does,” Jo says with a shake of her head. “Cece and Ben will appreciate you looking after their boy.”

“He’s had a rough go of it since the accident.”

Jo nods in agreement. I head back to my office, grab my hat, and head back to the truck. Jolene’s takes me less than ten minutes to get there without the lights on. I won’t use them until after I sign the papers on Monday. This works out in the Bennetts favor. I’m not going to the bar on official business. If someone needs to be arrested, I’ll call for the deputy on duty. I park out front and head through the front door. Jolene has her shotgun out. Wilder is sitting on one stool. Three busted up men are in a nearby booth. Jolene greets me first.



“Sheriff.”

The guys at the table immediately start moaning about pressing charges. I walk over and take the stool next to Wilder.

“Round of beers and shots on me.”

Jolene puts the shotgun away and pours beers for everyone. The server hurries over and grabs the tray for the bruised men in the booth. They stopped complaining long enough to drink. I drop the shot inside the mug of beer and chug it. Being off duty has its perks.

I pull out enough money from my wallet to cover the drinks with enough left over for a generous tip.

“Jolene, can you give me the rundown?”

She pointed to the biggest of the three men. “That one kept mouthing off. He threw the first punch and when the broken,” she uses her fingers in air quotes, “cowboy dropped their friend, the other two jumped in.”

I take in the busted table, stool and chairs.

“How much damage.”

“Eight hundred oughta do it.”

I nod and for the first time approach the men.

“I’ll need two hundred from each of you.”

“What?”

“Why?”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Look. We can do this one of two ways. I’m off duty right now. The four of you can split the damage and go on your merry way or I can call in the wagon and throw you all in jail since you,” I point to the big guy, “threw the first punch.”

“You’re taking his word over ours?” First punch asks.

“No, I’m taking the word of the owner of the establishment. She's been running for over thirty years. I trust she’ll tell the truth. She always does.”

“I’m not paying.”

“Me either.”

“No way in hell.”

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I shrug my shoulders. "Suit yourself."

I pull out my phone and call Buck.

"Bring the wagon to Jolene's. I want to make sure this is done right."

"Be there in ten."

I take a seat next to Wilder. He slides a wad of cash toward Jolene. I nod in recognition. Those boys are going to be in for a world of surprise when they get hauled in and Wilder walks. I drink the ice water Jolene put in place of the empty beer mug.

True to his word, Buck arrives ten minutes later. I hear the sirens. Lucky bastard. Not that I wouldn't use them in case of emergency. Buck walks in with deputies Boyd and Jeffries. I point to the booth.

Buck walks over. "Gentlemen, please stand up, place your hands behind your back."

"You're really going to arrest us?" First punch says.

"Yep," Buck says, then reads them their rights.

"Hey, what about him?" One of the guys points to Wilder.

I smile. "He paid his share of damages and is free to go. The same deal I offered each of you."

“We’ll pay!” First punch cries out.

“Too late. Deputies are here. Now you can pay the damages, court fees, and fines.”

I wait until they leave before returning my attention to Wilder.

“You ready to go home?”

“I can drive.”

“I know you can, but I’m taking you.”

He nods and stands up, putting his hat on his head. He knows there’s no use arguing with me. Wilder is two years older than my oldest boy, Dalton, but still young enough to be mine. Hell, his parents are my age and Wilder has two older brothers. Seven boys in all. Cece Bennett has her hands full.

We walk in silence to the truck. I notice his limp is still overly pronounced. He finished physical therapy less than a week ago and still had a long road to recovery. Says something. He whipped those three boys asses as banged up as he is.

“Wanna talk about it?”

He shakes his head. “Not much to say. He got mouthy. I ignored him. He decided the best way to get my attention was to throw a punch. He started it. I finished it.”

I nod my head. “If you ever want to talk about anything, I’m a good listener and I’m not your parent. Allows me to see things without all the family drama attached.”

He nods his head. “Appreciate it, Effrem.”

We make the rest of the ride out to the ranch in companionable silence. I won't force the boy to talk. He's got a lot on his plate.

## Chapter 9

### Ruby

After Dutch left, I got busy baking. Imagine my surprise when I found a handwritten recipe for the cherry pies in the basket's bottom.

After I put the pinwheels in the oven, I cook the cherries. I taste the cherry blossom infused honey for this batch and decide to add cracked black pepper to the mix to make the cherry flavor pop, then decide to go another step and make a honey mascarpone mix for some of the fried pies. I'll make two different versions. The mascarpone will be in the middle enrobed in the black pepper cherry mixture.

I spent the next few hours baking. Besides the three cookies and the fried pies, I make banana bread blondies with dark chocolate chunks, magic cookie bars, and double dark chocolate espresso brownies. After everything is cool, I make up the boxes. I'm taking them to Calico Gypsy, the police station, Dustin's realty office, the Bennett ranch and one for the McGraws. And last, a small box just for Dustin containing two dozen of the cookies he loves. I only hope he likes them as much as Dutch did.

I take care to bundle up before making the walk. I can reach everyone but the McGraws with a quick walk. I love the bakery's location on main street. After walking a block, I turn and look at the bakery, imagining the new sign hanging over the blue and cream striped awning. Soon it will say 'Sweet Serenade' in cerulean blue cursive. With a large sign on the building with the name printed on it. Since not everyone reads cursive these days.

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With a smile, I turn back around and head to the police station. My heart flutters. I wonder if the sheriff is in today? Stop that. Stop thinking about the sheriff. I enjoy spending time with Dustin, but I think he and I both know it's headed for friendsville. We enjoy each other's company but there's no spark. I mean, I could do him. Not that I've done anyone other than my soon to be ex. Oh hells, I need to stop reading romance novels. Why can't I be in lust with the super hot realtor? I mean, he's cover model hot and with that long hair has women drooling all over him. I've seen it twice now on our dates. Hmm, next date I'll have to insist on paying half. He said I could decide in one date, but it took two. The first date, I was seriously flattered to be asked out by such a gorgeous man. He's sweet, kind, and a good kisser. I mean that's not NO, heat. I remember the spark I had with Roger. It was more than heat even from the start.

Somewhere along the way, we grew apart and he became the spitting image of his father. The man he despised when we first got together. We were high school sweethearts who married and went to the same college together. I had to get my degree to please his parents. Mine never cared about much, least of all me. They were happy to see me married and out of their hair at eighteen.

We'd hoped for kids. When none had come, we both got tested. My heart sinks thinking about that day. The day they told me I was infertile. I've always wanted children and he refused to adopt. It's one of reasons I know Dustin and I can't be more than friends. He wants children and, while he's willing to adopt, he'd really like biological children as well. I can't give him those.

Roger changed that day. His journey to become his father began the moment we left the clinic. He became cold and distant, but I was determined to make it work. He

started having affairs. I started secretly squirreling away money. I wasn't allowed to work outside the house for the first decade of our marriage, so I saved my allowance. I had to spend most of it on clothes to keep up appearances, but I shopped wisely and hit sales, saving up enough for the bakery and to live off of long enough to get it going.

I arrive at the police station, opening the door to find a blonde woman with red and green tipped hair wearing perhaps the ugliest sweater, Christmas or otherwise, I've had the misfortune of laying eyes on. She greets me with a warm smile. I return the gesture.

"Welcome to the police station. I'm Trixie. How can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm Ruby, the new bakery owner. I brought a few things for the office."

"Is that what's in the rolling cart?"

I smile and nod. "It is. I thought using it would be best in the cold. Plus, I'm not graceful on the best of days, and didn't want to trip and drop the goods."

Trixie smiles and laughs. "That's not what I heard."

"What did you hear?"

"That you're a good dancer. Dustin's taken you dancing twice in one week."

I smile and shake my head. "Word travels fast in small towns."

"Like wildfire on cotton tinder."

"Good to know," I say, bending to retrieve the first box from the cart.

I hand it to Trixie. “Enjoy. There are some fried cherry pies in there made with the McGraws’ cherries.”

“Did you use their honey too?”

“I did. Ellie was kind enough to send me a few this morning in a basket Dutch dropped off. Speaking of, could you tell me where they live? I made up a box for them too.”

“Oh, they’ll love it.”

Trixie gives me easy to follow directions. I can drop the box off on my way to the Broken B. After a few minutes of easy conversation, I stop by Calico Gypsy. The shop's owner is out, so I leave it with the sales associate on duty. The girl promises to put some back for Gypsy who is due back sometime later in the day.

I cross the street at the intersection and walk a few more blocks. I wasn’t expecting cold but I did grow up in Indiana. The weather doesn’t bother me as I cross at the walk and head three more blocks to Whitebear Realty. A pleasant young man greets me.

“Welcome to Whitebear Realty. I’m Cole. How may I be of service today?”

“Hello Cole. I’m looking for Dustin.”

“You and every other single woman in this town,” he says with a smile and a wink.

“I’m Ruby Buffett. I have something to drop off for him.”

“Oh, you’re Ruby. I’ve heard good things about you. He’s out at Broken B.”



I smile. “I’m headed there next. Let me leave this with you.” I say, bending to take out another large box filled with baked goods.

Cole takes the box with a smile. “Thank you.”

“I best be on my way. Nice to meet you, Cole.”

“Same, Ruby. Have a great day.”

“Thank you, you too.”

I retrace my path with a pep in my step. I’ll no doubt get feedback regarding the baked goods and I haven’t even opened yet. The benefit of people welcoming me besides the obvious is getting opinions before the doors open.

I hurry inside and grab everything I need, lock up behind me and head toward the McGraws’. Unfortunately, they are not home. I leave the box of baked goods inside a wooden box just outside the door. It looks like a package receptacle. It’s not big enough for a wood bin. I haven’t seen one of those since I was a little girl. We kept one outside the front door filled with split wood for the wood-burning stove to heat our old farmhouse.

The drive to the Broken B is pleasant. A fresh coat of snow blankets the landscape. It’s nothing but pristine, untouched land on both sides of the short drive.

I stop at the big house first to drop off the box. If Dustin is here, I can give him his cookies. I knock on the door. Cece answers.

“Ruby, what a pleasant surprise.”

“Cece, I brought some goodies for you all.”

“Please come in. Let’s take them into the kitchen.”

Cece takes the box and leads me to her kitchen. It’s enormous and fitted with professional grade appliances. My mouth hangs open as I take it all in. The money

they sank into this kitchen could pay for my bakery. Of course, I got the bakery for a steal. I got a huge discount for being a woman-owned business in Wolf Creek. Plus, the town, who owns the property, badly wants a bakery. I snap out of it a split-second before Cece sits the box on the counter and asks if I wanted coffee.

“I’d love some coffee and a napkin to wipe the drool off my chin. Your kitchen is gorgeous.”

Cece blushes. “Thank you. That’s a tremendous compliment coming from you. I can’t wait to try some of this.”

Cece takes two dessert plates and sits them on the kitchen island beside the box. I noticed a nearby kitchen nook table with bench seating. Sunlight filters through the gauzy curtains.

“May we take our coffee in the nook?”

Her face lights up. “Yes, that’s perfect. What would you like?”

“I’ll take one of the pies wrapped in gold foil.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Both are NorthStar cherries made with cherry blossom infused honey from the McGraws. The gold foil has mascarpone lightly sweetened with the same honey.”

“Oh my, that sounds decadent. Are those chocolate pecan pie cookies?”

“They are. Dustin described them to me. I’ve had them a few times. I hope he likes them.”

“We should enjoy these pies right quick, box up these goodies and take them to the boys. They’re a thirty-minute ride away repairing a section of fence.”

“I’d love to.”

“These are foil wrapped; we can walk and eat?”

“I’ll help you pack them.”

## Chapter 10

### Ruby

Fifteen minutes later, Cece and I are on horseback, heading away from the barn toward a trail that leads west. At least, according to Cece. I’m more of a turn left, or right. I suppose if I’m going to live out here, I should learn my directions. Someday I hope to build or buy a house outside of town. Maybe even have a horse of my own.

“That pie was the best thing I’ve tasted in a long time. I didn’t think Ellie’s recipe could be improved upon. You’ll have to let her try some of the new pies.”

I smile. “I left them a box on the front porch on my way here. I hope she doesn’t mind that I tweaked the recipe. I have a habit of doing that.”

Cece laughs and shakes her head. “Not at all. Hers is still the original and that’s enough for Ellie. Wait until you meet her. She’s the sweetest soul.”

“Dutch sure is. I’m planning on buying as much of their stock as I can.”

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“Oh, Ruby, the whole town will love you for that alone.”

“Looks like I need to make some more cherry desserts. Oh, I could reconstitute the freeze dried cherries and use them in challah bread.”

I noticed the look on Cece’s face and burst out laughing. “Drying and reconstituting gives them a different flavor and texture than a fresh or frozen fruit.”

“Good to know. Does this mean the rumors of you making bread are true?”

“Yes, I’ve even been promised a peek at Ellie’s pumppernickel recipe.”

“Dutch must’ve taken a shine to you to offer Ellie’s pumppernickel.”

“I was dumbfounded when I found the recipe for the fried pies.”

“Neither would ever admit it, but I think the extra money from the crops let them do more than eke by. They haven’t taken a vacation since then and we all know better than to offer help. Not unless we see something neither of them can deny. Sweet people would do anything for anybody but never ask for help.”

I feel a deep pang in my chest for the couple. And I have yet to meet Dutch’s other half.

“I don’t have enough cash on hand to buy what they’ve been saving. What about some kind of town event celebrating the cherry? Only do it in the wintertime. A breath of spring in the middle of ice. January is the perfect time.”

“I love that idea. And you don’t know this, but Ben and I both have seats on the town council. We have a meeting Monday night. I’ll bring it up. Neither Dutch nor Ellie would consider us buying their crops as charity. Not if it's for a legit reason.”

“I hope to take part in all the town events. I spent my childhood in small town Indiana and I miss the camaraderie you don’t get in bigger cities. Much less Naptown.”

“Naptown?”

“It’s a nickname for Indianapolis.”

“How did it come to that?” she asks with a laugh.

“It started in the nineteen-twenties. Jazz musicians started referring to it as Naptown, a cool place to hang out and chill.”

“Do you miss it?”

“No. I’ve lived the past decade in Zionsville. The people the ex hangs out with are a bit too pretentious for me. Zionsville is much smaller than Naptown, but it’s still not a small town.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t enjoy living in a bigger town, much less a city.”

The horse I’m riding, Paxon, a tall gelding, is more spirited than Jack , the ranch hand, indicated. Thankfully, I’ve ridden most of my life. So far, I’m handling him beautifully. Cece and I continue to ride and talk. She’s easy to talk to. I find myself pouring out my life story to her while she shares stories of her boys with me.

From her oldest Walker, who’s a single father of twin four-year-old daughters, to her third son Wilder.

“Of all my boys, I’m most worried about him.”

“Wilder Bennett, the rodeo star, is your Wilder?” I ask, incredulously.

She smiles, but I see sadness in her eyes.

“You know about the accident?”

“I do. How’s he doing?”

“Not good. He’s been drinking too much and getting into fights. Effrem’s kept him out of jail, but who knows how long that will last.”

Effrem, as in Sheriff Effrem Reeves? My ears perk at the sound of his name.

“Ben and I were friends with him and his late wife, Evie. We all went to school about the same time.”

That made him more than a decade older than me. Meh, I don’t care if he’s ten decades older. Okay, a hundred years might be a bit much. I want to be able to have sex. Lots of hot sweaty sex with orgasms. Real orgasms. Lost in my fantasy of a naked sheriff, I don’t see the dip in the terrain until Paxon stumbles. He rights himself and immediately starts bucking like a bronco. I’m holding on for dear life. Thank God, the bucking doesn’t last long. Instead of settling down, he bolts into the trees. The reins somehow snag on a branch and rip from my hands and halfway off Paxon’s head. I’m holding on to the saddle horn for all I’m worth, using every leg command I’ve ever been taught.

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I can hear Cece yelling behind me. I duck and dodge branches as we race through the trees, hell bent for leather. My heart is thundering as loud as the horses' hooves.

Effrem

We settled into a comfortable silence. The boy didn't want to talk. I don't blame him. I can't begin to fathom what he's been through. He'd done a little rodeoing in his younger days. Hell, half the men in the county have. It became more than a hobby for Wilder; it became his reason to live and breathe. Now he has to go through the grieving process while still healing his broken body.

"Do you want me to drop you off at the main house?"

"No. Drop me off at the barn. I want to see that new horse you brought in."

"Torrent is a beauty. Just needs some love. He had a bad go of it with his last owner. He's sixteen-one hands high. A bay leopard appy with a large star and a sock on the left hind."

"Sounds gorgeous and nearly identical to Paxon. He's one of our newer geldings. Same coloring; only difference is that he has a sock on the left front."

"Tell Jack I said good luck telling them apart."

He laughs. "Jack 's pretty good with them. All we have to do is point out the difference and he'll know. He's a good kid."



“That he is. I’m glad he and his mother had him work for the ranch instead of going to juvie.”

“You didn’t have to give him the option.”

“I’m happy the judge agreed with me.”

I park at the barn and get out with Wilder. Jack comes out to greet us.

“Sheriff Wilder, good to see you. Can I help you with anything?”

“Wilder wants to get a look at the new gelding.”

“I haven’t seen him yet,” Jack says.

“He’s darn near Paxon’s twin, from what Effrem says.”

“I’ll fetch him. Should I saddle him up?”

“No, but bring him to the round pen and we’ll work him out,” I say.

Wilder and I head to the round pen. Bobby Ray is exercising a dun colored filly.

“Hey Bobby Ray.”

“Hello Sheriff. Wilder. How are you?”

“I’m good, Bobby Ray. You?”

“Can’t complain. Love my job, dating a new girl. Life’s good.”

Jack comes out of the barn leading Torrent. Only it's not Torrent.

“Jack, that's Paxon. Torrent is the other bay leopard appy.”

“We have two leopard apps?” Bobby Ray asks.

“Yeah, I brought one in a few days ago.”

“Damn, I had to run out of town. Just got back late last night. Which means I gave the horse to Mrs. Buffet to ride.”

“Shit! How long ago did they leave?”

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“Less than ten minutes ago.”

I run to the barn at a full sprint, open the first stall I see, and lead the horse to the tack room. I’ve been here enough to know my way around. I saddle the horse in record time and head back to the pen.

“Which direction?”

“West. There's a broken fence in the second pasture. They were headed to take the guys' treats.”

I take the trail at a fast trot, waiting until I’m in the open field to let loose.

I kick the gelding’s sides and hunker down. “Yah,” I say, slapping the reins on the horse's hind quarter to get up extra speed.

We speed across the open field. I’m nearing the other side when I hear a scream. I don’t know if this horse has more to give, but I urge him forward. The horse gives me another burst of speed. I know this trail like the back of my hand.

We burst onto the trail and I sped closer to the screams. I see Cece first. She’s riding faster than I’ve ever seen her go chasing Ruby’s horse.

“He bolted!” Cece yells when she sees me.

I pass her. My gelding has a longer stride. We eat up the distance between us and Ruby. As I get closer, I notice the horse’s bridle is gone. Ruby has both hands in the

horse's mane trying to get him to stop. She sounds surprisingly calm talking to the animal, but I can see the panic on her face.

I get the gelding beside her. She glances at me with wide eyes.

“I’m pulling you over.”

She shakes her head. “I’m too heavy.”

“Bullshit. Now get ready.”

Torrent is a big horse, but this gelding has him by a hand. I reach over and grab her, pulling her up and across my lap. She clings to me. Once I get her settled, I ease the horse to a stop. Slowing our speed gradually.

“Woah, big fellow.”

Cece pulls to a stop beside us. Ruby is shaking in my arms.

“It’s alright. You’re going to be fine. I’ve got you,” I tell Ruby.

She nods.

“I’ll send one of the boys to round up the horse. Pax has never acted like that before,” Cece says.

“That’s because it’s not Paxon. That’s Torrent.”

“The rescue horse you brought for Jessi?”

“It is. I didn’t realize you had a clone. I haven’t seen Pax before. One has a rear sock,

one has a front. Same side. It's the only difference I can see between them."

"Damn," Cece murmurs.

Ruby remains silent on the way back to the ranch. She's shaking for most of it. I put my arms around her and pull her closer on the horse. She's sitting sideways in my arms. Without thinking it through, I drop a kiss on the top of her head.

"You're alright, Ruby."

She nods her head. Her skin is pale and I have the urge to kiss her until she forgets about today's events. Where the hell did that come from? I haven't kissed another woman since the day I met Evie. She's my everything always will be. My dick needs to get with the same program it's been on for the last sixteen years. We are not going to betray Evie just because Ruby is the first woman to get a rise out of me since I lost my beloved.

## Chapter 11

### Ruby

I can't seem to stop shaking. I've been bucked off before and had a horse bolt on me before. But it was nothing like today. That horse was scared. My head was less than half an inch away from branches as we passed them at breakneck speed. I did everything I could think of to bring the horse under control. There wasn't a safe place to bail. I held on for dear life and continued to talk to Paxon. Well, the horse I thought was Paxon.

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It's all I can do to hold it together and not completely lose my shit in front of the sheriff and Cece. I'm afraid if I talk, I'll lose the tenuous control I have on my emotions. By the time we arrive at the barn there's several more people there including Dustin. I'm so relieved to see him.

He runs over to us.

"Ruby, are you alright? Bobby Ray said you accidentally got the wrong horse."

I nod then shake my head. "I'm breathing," I say.

"Let me help you down."

I nod my head and he helps me off the horse with Effrem's assistance. Dustin wraps his arms around me. "You're as pale as a ghost and you're trembling. What happened?"

The concern in his dark brown eyes is my undoing. Neither my family nor my soon to be ex would give a damn. They'd be too busy scolding me for making a mistake. His appearance and concern were unexpected. I thought he was in the field. I buried my head in the crook of his neck and sobbed.

I can hear Cece explaining over my sobs. No one scolds me for crying in public. Or, for that matter, crying at all. Dustin rubs his hand across the back of my coat in a soothing manner. He murmurs soothing words while Cece talks. I finally pull myself together enough to talk.

“Can you take me home, please?”

“The bakery?” Dustin asks.

I nod. “Yes, I finished it this morning.”

“Let me run grab your purse. If you’re sure you don’t want to rest at the house.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude. I need to be home. In my own bed. Maybe in a tiny ball with a pint of Mayan Chocolate and a comedy.”

Dustin loosens his hold long enough for Cece to wrap me in a hug.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Still, it’s my ranch and I feel responsible.”

“Everyone’s okay.” I lean in closer to her and whisper. “I don’t want anyone to see me lose anymore than I already have.”

I see understanding in her arms. She hugs me one last time.

“I’ll go get your purse. One of the boys will drop your car off later.”

“Thank you, Cece.”

“Thank you, Ruby for, well, being you.”

I nod, feeling my throat thicken, and more tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I

know if I talk now I'm going to lose it again. The fear is close to spilling over and causing a whole new crying jag. This one, worse than the last.

Dustin helps me into his big truck. Cece returns a few minutes later with my purse and the box of cookies I had in my car for Dustin. She hands the purse to me and the box to Dustin.

"Ruby made these for you."

Dustin looked at me. In the warmth of his truck, I relaxed enough to nod.

"Go ahead."

I watch as he opens the box. His eyes widened.

"Are these what I think they are?"

"Indeed." I say, a small smile turning up the corners of my mouth.



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My eyes never leave his face as he takes his first bite. A look of pleasure washes over his face. He closes his eyes.

“These are good. Very good. Good enough to send to my grandmother.”

“I have extra. I can get you some.”

He shakes his head. “Later. Let’s get you home and tucked into your apartment.”

“Yes, please.”

The ride back to town is filled with comfortable silence. I’m too exhausted to talk and Dustin seems to sense it.

“I know this isn’t the best time to have this conversation, but I see the spark between you and Effrem.”

I blushed. “This isn’t the best time, but you’re right. I’m attracted to him. I find you attractive. You’re so fun to be with. I think we’d be great in the sack, but I think we’re both looking for more.”

Dustin nods his head. “Honestly, I feel the same. You’re very attractive and yes, we could tear up the sheets, but I’m ready to find my forever and have a family. You know Effrem’s a widower, right?”

“Cece mentioned him having a late wife about a minute before Torrent, the horse I thought was Paxon, bolted.”

“Poor thing. You didn’t even have time to process the information before Torrent did his thing.”

“Has he dated a lot since he lost his wife.”

“No, not at all. Evie was his whole world. They dated throughout junior high and high school. Married as soon as she graduated. He’s a year older than she is. I don’t think he’s gone on a date.”

My heart sank to the bottom of my feet. “Oh, well. Looks like I have a snowball's chance in hell.”

Dustin shook his head. “No, not at all. The way he looks at you. There’s a spark. Something I’ve never seen in him since Evie’s passing. Don’t lose hope. Just know the path may not be easy. Effrem’s likely to dig in his heels and fall in love kicking and screaming. He’s fiercely loyal.”

“Thank you for telling me all this.”

“Hey, I said I wanted a friend if we didn’t hit it off. I meant it. I’ve enjoyed getting to know you this week. There’s no reason we still can’t hang out as friends. Even go on dates. And don’t think you’re paying half. Grandma would drive up and smack me upside the head.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle picturing a little old woman slapping such a strapping guy upside the head. He smiles and starts to chuckle.

“You're picturing it, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“She’s due to visit after the new year. I’ll make sure I introduce you.”

“I can’t wait. I feel like I know her already from the stories you’ve told me.”

I’m feeling a little better by the time we arrive at the bakery. Dustin walks me to the backdoor.

“Do you want me to come up?”

I shake my head. “I need to decompress.”

“I understand. Call if you need anything. Anything at all. No matter what time it is.”

I give him a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. “Thank you for everything.”

He pulls me into a quick hug. “I mean it. Call me if you need me.”

“I will thank you.”

I hurry up the stairs and let myself into my apartment. I sink down on the couch for a few minutes, but I’m too restless. Maybe take a nap. I kick off my shoes by the front door and head to my bedroom. I grab the folded blanket on the end of the bed and pull it on top of me, not bothering to get under the bed covers.

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I don't know how long I toss and turn before I give up and head to the bathroom. Maybe a hot shower will help. I was surprised to find the bathroom not only had a separate tub and shower. The shower was a little larger than the normal walk in and it had multiple heads. I turn them all on and let the water get hot. While I wait for the water to warm I pull out two fresh towels and place them on the vanity beside the shower. One towel for my hair. One for my body. I step beneath the water and let the emotions pour out of me while the hot water runs over me. I feel alone. Not an unfamiliar feeling. Being in a marriage with Roger for twenty years, I felt alone a lot. But today, at this moment, it feels overwhelming. I could have lost my life today or been seriously injured. Add to the definitive end of my budding romance with Dustin. It wouldn't have been a big deal without the other event.

I was absolutely terrified those few minutes during Torrent's rampage. I'm thankful that neither one of us was hurt. If I had been hurt or worse killed who would have actually given a fuck. I mean, everyone in town is nice but they don't know me. Not yet.

I sink to the floor and let the sobs take over.

## Chapter 12

Effrem

I watch Dustin escort Ruby to his truck and I want it to be me. God, what is wrong with me? You're just concerned. There's nothing wrong with that. I tell myself. Only I know it's more. I shake off the feeling and turn the gelding around to find Torrent. Ben, Witt, Cece, and Waylon Bennett join me. We don't have to search for long. The

horse is already heading back to the barn when we find him in an open field. I dismount and walk over to him. Ben tosses me a halter. I put it on the horse, then check his legs for injury.

“Leg’s look good. Looks like he got out of the ordeal without even a scratch.”

I mount back up and we head to the barn while talking.

“Wish we could say the same for Ruby,” Ben says.

“Yeah, she looked as white a sheet,” Waylon adds.

“I’ll drive by and check on her after we get Torrent back to the stable. I was heading into town anyway.”

“What brings you out to the ranch today?” Cece asks.

“I gave Wilder a ride home.”

“Damn, is that boy fighting again?” Ben asks.

“Just like all the other times, Ben. Wilder did not start the fight. He did finish it. He paid his share of damages and he’s free to go.”

“What about the other guy?”

“Guys. There were three. They didn’t want to pay for damages. They get a night’s stay on the house at the office. We’ll see what they have to say tomorrow morning.”

“Effrem, you can’t bend the law to protect him. Even if you’ve known him since the day he was born,” Cece says.

“You know that’s not how I work. There were witnesses that said he didn't start that fight. Judge Holtz would toss those city boys in jail for ninety-days just to be ornery. Wilder would walk away with a pat on the back for defending himself so well against three men when he just got done with physical rehab.”

“That’s true,” Ben agrees. “I just wish he’d settle.”

“That’ll take a while. Take it from someone who lost the love of their life. And make no mistake, that’s what rodeo is or was to Wilder, the love of his life. He’s not just adjusting to his new physical reality. He’s grieving a loss. A deep one.”

“Wise words, my friend,” Ben says.

We arrived back at the barn. I dismount and hand my horse to a stable hand. Normally I’d take care of the horse myself before turning him out in a paddock for a cooldown. He deserves a little leg stretch without a rider. I say my goodbyes and hurry to my truck.

Ben and Cece would find out sooner rather than later about Wilder’s fight. Best they get the correct information up front instead of the grape vine version. While I normally leave it up to Wilder to tell them what happened. In this case, I thought it prudent to tell them myself. I sent a quick text to Wilder to give him a heads up.

They asked

I gave brief info

Call if you need me

E.D.R.

??

Wild

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Poor kid. I hope I didn't make the situation worse. I'd planned on talking to Cece and Ben about Wilder possibly joining the force. That conversation can wait for another day.

??

I may have pushed the speed limit to get to town. I don't know why. Dustin is still likely with Ruby. They've been seen around town frequently this week. I can't say that I blame the man, but I need to see for myself she's okay. I don't see his truck out front. I park my truck behind the bakery. Dustin's truck is not here either.

I knock on the back door. When no one answers, I try the knob when it turns; I open the door and go inside. Out of habit I close and lock the door behind me. I can always come back down the stairs if someone needs in. I take the stairs two at a time and knock on the door. When no one answers, I knock harder thinking she might be asleep.

No, answer. I try the knob. Again, it turns and I open the door. I can't believe she left her front door unlocked. I'm in a good mood to give her a piece of my mind. I've been in the small apartment before. It's an open floor plan. She's partitioned the bedroom with tall folding silk screens. A neoclassical six panel done in mahogany wood and teal silk. I helped my youngest study for his art classes in school.

The sound of sobbing catches my attention, and I hurry toward the bathroom door. I knock, but she doesn't seem to hear me over the water and crying. Without further thought, I opened the door and entered the bathroom. Ruby's curled up into a fetal position on the shower floor, crying so hard her entire body is shaking.



I open the glass door and step inside picking her up in my arms. She startles and looks up.

“Sheriff.”

“Effrem.”

I carry her out of the shower, grab one of the towels nearby, wrap her in it, before turning off the water. Grabbing the other towel, I pick her up and carry her back into the bedroom. Sitting her on the bed, I pull a nearby cover on top of her.

“I’ll be right back. I’m dripping water all over your floors.”

She nods her head and closes her eyes.

## Chapter 13

Effrem

I hurry back to the bathroom and strip out my wet clothes. Turning my boots upside down in the shower before searching for another towel. With nothing else to wear I wrap the towel around my hips and head back into the other room. She’s laying in bed with her teeth chattering. Fresh tear tracks run down her beautiful face. My heart aches for her. I pull down the covers on the empty side of the bed before lifting her and putting her under the covers. I climb on the other side pulling her close to me.

Ruby turns to face me putting her head on my shoulder. I realize I could have lost her today and that makes me both terrified and desperate.

“Ruby, I’m going to kiss you, unless you tell me not too.”

I waited, when she said nothing I put my hand under her chin and tilted it up bringing my lips to hers. The kiss started out slow and chaste. I meshed my lips with hers enjoying the sensation. Ruby is the second woman I've kissed. Evie and I met on our first day of kindergarten and became inseparable. Our friendship grew into romance. Which grew into love.

At the first brush of her lips against mine, my cock tented the towel. I ignore the traitorous bastard and deepen the kiss. I bite back a moan and slide my tongue into her mouth tasting her for the first time. She tastes sweet like the goodies she bakes. Her moan has me deepening the kiss. I put my hand in her hair and pulls us even closer. She runs her hands along my chest and shoulders.

I nibble at her lips, pulling the lower one into my mouth and sucking on it. She moans again and I find my hands roaming her curves of their own volition. I loosen the towel and push it to the side reaching for her luscious breasts. Damn they fit perfectly in my hand. Did I mention, I can palm a basketball? My trick to impress the lady since seventh grade. She's so damn responsive, she has my dick leaking precum and my balls aching. I move the other hand down to the rounded globe of her ass cheek, squeezing as I fondle her breast and continue the kiss.

We're eating at each other's mouths. I break the kiss, then trail kisses down her chin and neck, stopping to bite at the pulse in her throat. Her nails scrape down my back, encouraging my rough treatment. I suck one nipple into my mouth and roll the other between my thumb and forefinger.

I slide my other hand from her ass to her sex and feel that she's drenched for me. I release her nipple long enough to bring my wet fingers to my mouth and taste her honey. Oh, she is fucking delicious.

"You taste good. I'm going to eat that pretty pussy until you scream my name, but I'm not done with these bountiful breasts."

I know I should stop, but sixteen years of unspent passion is roaring through my veins. I lost what little restraint I had the moment I felt her soft body against me. I push my guilt aside and take the other nipple into my mouth. I massage her other breast, paying attention to the whole breast and not just the stiff peak of her nipple.

Her moans grow louder as I move from one breast to the next. I'm kissing under one of her breasts when her hips buck against me and she cries out. She just came. Oh, hell yeah. I look up at her. The look of shock on her face catches me by surprise. Maybe it's her first orgasm from breast play. Mine too. Damn, I like it.

She whimpers as I place kisses down her body. Skipping her sweet pussy, I kiss her from ankle to thigh, one leg at a time. She'sopping wet when I run my tongue from ass to clit in one long stroke. I flatten it out to make sure I get as much of her sweet pussy as I can. She comes unglued when I suck on her clit.

"That's it, my little spitfire. I love it when you make those sounds. They're so damn sexy."

I slide one finger inside her. Man, she's tight. She mewls as I stroke in and out of her. I add a second finger then curl them in a come hither motion, hitting just the right spot. I continue the same motion, lapping at her juices and nibbling on her folds. She's bucking her hips and moaning constantly. The sheets beneath her are soaked with her honey.

I can't wait to slide inside her, but not yet. I want to coax one more orgasm out of her. I move to that little bud of pleasure at her apex, and bite down until I hear her moan. I release her bud, only to draw it back into my mouth and suck on it, bringing more blood rushing to the area. I stop and work on the magic spot inside her pussy. She cums with a scream.

I crawl my way up her body, licking and kissing until I reach her lips. I take them in a

fierce, possessive kiss. I leave her breathless. Moving to her hips, I move one of her legs around my waist and put the other over my shoulder. My eyes never leave her face. She tenses only slightly when the head of my cock nudges at her entrance.

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“Keep your eyes on mine, Ruby. Tonight, you’re mine. If you understand, nod.”

She nods her head. Her eyes never leave mine. “That’s my good girl.”

I thrust my hips enough to push the head of my cock into her folds. She gasps, but relaxes. I slowly push forward until I’m into the hilt. I bite my lip to keep from commenting. Fuck me, she’s tight.

Sweat beads on my brow as I fight not to cum instantly. It’s been a damn long time and this woman feels like heaven. I shake off my pang of betrayal, and concentrate on the woman I’m inside. I fight not to roll my eyes back in my head as I start to move inside her. With slow, sensual movements. I roll my hips, giving her extra pleasure with each stroke.

Her whimpers are pushing me closer to the edge. I’m hanging on to my control by a thread. When her hips grind into mine with each thrust, I increase the pace. Her moans increase. I know I won’t last much longer, so I pick up the pace even more.

My balls are tight. I’m close. I pinch her clit, bucking hard against her at the same time. I shoot my seed deep into her womb. Ruby cries out her own release and I feel a gush of warmth. Well, I’ll be damned. The mysterious squirting orgasm. I remove her leg from my shoulder, bending down to kiss her as we ride our orgasms. I cum for the longest time.

I grab her gently, rolling us over with my softening cock still inside her. She tries to protest.

I shush her. “Sleep.” I command, before closing my own eyes.

It doesn’t take long before her breathing evens out and I’m not far behind her.

## Chapter 14

Ruby

I woke up the next morning deliciously sore, but alone. The bed beside me long since abandoned. I feel like someone hit me in the chest. I push it away and make a dash for the bathroom. After I’m done, I wash my hands and splash cold water on my face.

While brushing my teeth, I contemplate what I should do next. Or hell even feel. I mean, what did I expect? For him to pledge his undying love. I mean, I got the impression he hasn’t dated since he lost his wife. That doesn’t mean he hasn’t given in to sexual urges and had a one-night stand or fifty. Though the latter seems uncharacteristic from what little I know.

I walk back through the apartment, heading to the closet to grab my robe. I no sooner get it tied than I hear a knock on the door. I hurry to the door. Maybe he went out to grab breakfast or something.

I open the door to find Bobby Ray and Jack. Their eyes bug out of their head. Jack blushes. Mind you, my pink plush robe falls half-way to my knees and is, in my opinion, more frumpy than sexy. Bobby Ray swallows and holds my keys aloft.

“Ma’am, we brought you your keys. Your pretty car is parked out back in the first spot.”

“Thank you, Bobby Ray, and Jack . Give me a few minutes. I’ll take you both to breakfast as a thank you for delivering my car.”

I bite back a giggle at calling the fancy SUV a car. I'll ask Dustin about where to trade it in.

"There's no need for that, Ma'am. Mrs. Bennett sent us," Jack says.

I shake my head. "I insist. I'll text Cece and let her know."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Bobby Ray says.

"You're welcome, and please call me Ruby."

"Yes, Ma'...um, Ruby," Jack says.

"We'll wait in the truck," Bobby Ray adds."

"I'll be down in ten minutes."

They nod and head back down the stairs. I lock the door and head to the shower. I take the quickest shower of my life. Instead of moping today, I'm going to pull on my big girl panties and live my life. I'm done waiting for life to happen to me.

I use my favorite brand of dry hairspray to refresh my red locks. I keep the make-up simple, a powder powder base, blush across my cheeks, winter berry smudge-proof lip gloss and two coats of Million Lash mascara.

I throw on socks and my new pine candy plaid bra and panty set. They're primarily dark green with red accents. The panties have a lace panel at the top of the front. They're super cute. I was saving them for a special occasion. I'm alive. Breathing. That's a good enough occasion for me.

Next, I pull on thick cotton socks and slide into my new boots. I don't have a lot of

choices. My clothes and furniture still haven't arrived. The truck broke down and they're waiting for a part. It should arrive tomorrow morning.

I chose a dark green, thick cotton maxi, with long, flowing sleeves. Pairing the outfit with simple silver jewelry. I grab my bag and coat before locking up. Hurrying down the stairs, I put on my coat as I go, locking the bakery's back door before heading to the back parking lot.



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The boys waited for me. Their truck parked next to mine is a massive blue Dodge dually with the ranch's logo on the side. Bobby Ray is in the driver's seat. I'm not surprised Jack is only seventeen.

"I wave to them."

"I spotted a greasy spoon a few miles from town the other day. Will you follow me there?"

They both smile and nod their head. I hop into the SUV and toward the diner. It's a grill, actually, according to its name. Stagecoach Grill. The parking lot is more than half-full. Last time I drove by, I didn't see an empty spot.

We park side by side. Jack hurries out of the truck to open my door for me.

"Thank you, Jack."

"You're welcome, Miss Ruby."

Close enough, I think. They walk in beside me. Bobby Ray opens the door. A server named Lorey seats us and hands us menus before taking off to grab ice water and the coffeepot.

I choose an omelet with spinach, feta, and mushrooms. It's topped with a fresh tomato salsa. The boys both ordered some monster omelet. Made with six eggs. It has bacon, sausage, ham, potatoes, fresh cracklins, and your choice of three cheeses. It's smothered in cheese sauce and topped with sausage gravy. It comes with a stack of

pancakes, a side of home fries, and a six-ounce ribeye.. It's called the Paul Bunyan.

We spend the next hour enjoying breakfast and passing the time. The place is a continual rotation of all walks of life. From men in business suits to bikers. I even spotted a nun in the corner. Feeling much lighter by the time we part ways, I head back to the bakery and try the next batch of goodies for the town to taste test.

## Chapter 15

December 21

Effrem

Of all the things I've done, sneaking out in the middle of the night might be the most cowardly. The guilt of betraying Evie is eating at me. I can't believe I hopped in bed with another woman. Not just any other woman. It had to be Ruby. She's been under my skin since the moment I laid eyes on her.

She's sweet, kind, and generous.

She's not the one night stand kind of woman. And yet, I clearly just placed her in that category. Don't even get me started on her and Dustin's relationship or her divorce. I hadn't even confirmed that her divorce will be final on Christmas day.

Sally Anne's information is usually spot on. She may gossip but she doesn't spread rumors. What the hell was I thinking? This could fuck things up on so many levels. Dustin is my friend. How the hell could I have not at least asked about their relationship.

It's because I wasn't thinking. I was reacting. Reacting to the fact I could have lost her that day. Fuck, if I haven't spent the last two weeks avoiding her. I haven't even

had a bite of the cherry fried pies she brought by a few more times. Trixie happened to mention it to Ruby one or a half a dozen times, that they're my favorite.

Yup, I'm being a coward. I've thrown myself into work to keep busy and to have an excuse to avoid seeing her. I know I can't do it forever. I've been to Evie's grave every damn day since I fucked up.

My desk phone rings, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Sheriff Reeves."

"Sheriff, this is Debbie Goodwin from the ER. Buck's been in an accident."

"I'll be right there."

I didn't give Debbie a chance to finish. I hung up the phone, grab my hat, and keys, and race to my truck. Wolf Creek isn't big enough for a hospital of its own, but we do have an emergency center.

I sprint out the door, past a confused Trixie and a startled Ruby, to my truck. I start it, throw it in reverse, and hit the lights before putting it in drive and peeling out. I floored the truck, making the mile drive in about two minutes. I pulled into my reserved entrance parking, locking, and hustling my ass inside.

Nurse Goodwin met me by the door.

"Sheriff, you didn't give me a chance to tell you it's nothing serious. Well, it might be for you. He broke his leg in three places. There's no way he can work."

"Well, fuck."

Her eyes widen. That's not a word I use in mixed company.

“Sorry, Debbie. I'm supposed to go out east and meet Jessi's boyfriend's parents.”

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“Oh, Sheriff. I’m terribly sorry. I wish I had better news.”

I let out the breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

“It’s not your fault. Debs. I’ll call her after I check on Buck.”

Debbie shakes her head. “He’s getting his cast on. You can pick him up in an hour when he’s ready. He’ll be loopy. Does he have anyone to take care of him?”

“Tillie’s, sixteen. She’ll know who to call. Wouldn’t hurt to have a professional close by if you know anyone. The county will pay for it. Triple time for holiday pay.”

Debbie is a single mom. Whose ex is a deadbeat and never pays his child support. She could use the extra money. I’ve tried to help several times. The town makes sure the kids don’t do without. That includes Christmas.

“I’ll do it. I have some vacation time coming. I can use the extra money.”

She surprises me by giving me a hug. I look down to see tears running down her cheeks.

“You don’t know it, but you saved Christmas.”

“Technically, Buck did, but we won’t mention that until after the cast comes off.”

She laughs. “Good plan. I’ll see you in an hour.”

I nod my head. I don't have time to go to the ranch, so I head back to my truck and drive the short distance to a nearby park.

Pulling into a spot farthest from the road, I dial Jessi's number. She picks up on the third ring.

"Dad, I'm so excited. Are you excited? Did you get your ticket?"

"Sweetheart, Buck broke his leg in three places."

"Oh dad. Oh no. No, no, no. This is not happening. I'll figure something out and call you back."

She hung up before I could respond. I have a bad feeling about this. Worse than not going out east to be with the family for Christmas. With nothing left to do but wait, I head to Molly's for a to-go sandwich. Their ham is my favorite. Thick sliced ham from a whole ham they slow roasted in the back. With two eggs and sharp cheddar cheese. All on soft thick sliced bread. They wrap it in wax paper.

Sally Anne smiles when I come through the door. "Good morning, Sheriff. The usual?"

"Not this morning, Sally Anne. I want a ham sandwich to go, please. Also, I need someone to deliver lunch and dinner to Buck's house today. Enough for him and Tillie. Maybe add extra for the nurse."

"Nurse? Is Buck alright?"

"Broke his leg."

Hell, I hadn't even thought to ask how. Talk about pre-occupied.

“I’ll let Sam know. We’ll get them fed.”

“Send the bill to my office.”

She smiles and nods before hurrying away to place my order. My phone rings. It’s Jessi. I head to the party room. It should be empty.

“Hello.” I answer as I slip through the doors.

“Dad. I have everything taken care of. We’re all coming home for Christmas.”

“Define we.”

“Me, Dalton, Clyde, Kai, and his parents. We’ll be there tomorrow. Tell Dee to make all our favorites and I’m sorry for the last minute stress she’ll be under.”

“What time are you getting in?”

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“We’ll be in by nine in the morning. Can you get the Bennett’s big van and pick us all up?”

“I’ll see you there, sweetheart.”

I am so screwed. Dee and Clay are already gone. I have to clean the house, grocery shop. Christmas shop. Prepare meals and work at the station.

### Chapter 16

Ruby

The sheriff ran out of the police like someone set his tail on fire. Trixie and I look at each other before she shrugs.

“I’ve never seen him like that before. Let me go check with dispatch.”

I nod my head and watch Trixie hurry from the front desk down the hallway. I haven’t been past the front desk. I have no idea what the rest of the police station looks like. When Trixie is still gone a few minutes later, I take a seat and open my phone.

I pretend to look through my phone while I think about the last two weeks. Effrem is clearly avoiding me, and I’m doing my best not to take it personally. I confessed everything to Dustin the day after. He invited me out to dinner. We went out to Jolene’s, the town’s honkey tonk. They have amazing pork tenderloin sandwiches and perhaps the best onion rings I’ve ever tasted.



Dustin's becoming a good friend. The only guy friend I ever had that's not gay. I was beginning to think gay men were the only men in my life that cared about me. My father certainly didn't. Roger, well, we know how that turned out.

After dinner, four beers and three new line dances later, I spilled my guts. Dustin explained that Effrem and Evie had practically met in the cradle and were friends before dating, then marrying.

She died in a tragic accident on their ranch. A spooked herd of wild mustangs trampled her. After she was thrown from the horse. She was found wrapped around her, then three-year-old son Clyde's body. Her sacrifice saved his life that day.

Dustin told me that Effrem hadn't dated no one and, to the best of his knowledge, had never slept with another woman outside of Evie. He suggested the sheriff likely feels guilty for cheating on his dead wife.

I can't compete with the memories of his beloved wife. Frankly, I don't want to. I became second fiddle in my marriage the moment I couldn't conceive children. Over the years, I went from second fiddle to persona non grata. I won't go through that again. I've wasted enough of my life. As much as I'm attracted to the sheriff, I'm going to have to let it go and move on.

Over the past two and a half weeks, the moving truck finally arrived. I have a storage unit for most of my things. It won't fit in the apartment's small closet. What clothes I had left were still too many to fit into the apartment. I had rolling wardrobes in the storage units with my spring and summer hanging in them.

I'll think about looking for another place to live after the bakery's been open for six months and I get an idea of what my revenue is going to be. It could be little or nothing for the first couple of years while the business gets up off the ground. Of course, at the rate my soon to be ex is ripping me off, I might have to pay him. My

half of everything is now an offer of twenty-five thousand. I'm not signing.

Trixie makes it back out to the front desk.

"You will never believe it. Poor sheriff. Buck, our second in command, broke his leg in three places today. He was helping a friend trim a tree or something when there was an accident. Sheriff was supposed to go out east to visit his daughter.

"His middle child, Jessi, is dating some boy from Connecticut. That's where she goes to school. She's in Yale attending law school. He's supposed to meet her boyfriend's parents. I can't remember Jessi ever having a serious boyfriend."

Trixie gave me a lot of information to process. Not that she knows or understands the extent of it. As far as I know, only four people know about the one-night stand. Me, Effrem, Dustin, and God.

"I'm sorry to hear he's going to miss out on meeting the parents. Has he met the boyfriend before?"

Trixie shakes her head. "I don't think so. I can't recall the Chief mentioning Jessi had a boyfriend. He's very protective of her. All the kids, really. Little Clyde was only three, and Jessi was nine when they lost their mama. Dalton, the oldest, was seventeen. He took it the hardest. Clyde was too little to understand, and Jessi surprised everyone by simply adjusting. Chief took them all to therapy and everything."

## Chapter 17

Effrem

I park the truck out front and head into the office. I have no idea how in the Sam Hill

I'm going to pull off the holidays. I have twelve days to cook, clean, play host, and manage the sheriff's office with my right-hand man out of commission for months.

He'll hate it, but I'll put him on desk duty in a couple weeks. If not, he'll drive Tilly and whoever's helping him insane. Buck never could sit still. Two weeks convalescing, he'll be grouchy, ornery, and cantankerous. That's just the tip of the iceberg.

Sandwich in one hand, I pull open the door with the other. Hurrying into the lobby, I nearly ran into Ruby.

Fuck, I don't need this. Wait a minute, Ruby.

"Ruby, I'm in big trouble, and I need your help."

She looks at me. I see a dozen thoughts flit across her face before she replies.

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“How can I Help?”

“Have you heard about Buck’s injury?”

“I have, and that you had to cancel your plans. Sorry, you’ll miss seeing your daughter.”

She sounds so sincere I feel like a raging idiot for blowing her off instead of facing her. I need to put on my big boy britches and have a conversation with her. I hand the sandwich to Trixie.

“Let me take you to breakfast and I’ll explain everything. I owe you a conversation, anyway.”

She nods. “I know just the place. Follow me?”

I nod my head. “Lead the way.”

Ruby tells Trixie goodbye before heading outside into her new SUV. She traded in her BMW XM Label for a Suburban High Country trim in bright red. She’ll be easy to spot next time she speeds. I escort her to her SUV before returning to my truck.

I follow her outside of town to the Stagecoach Grill. I park and hurry out of the truck to open the door for her. We walk side by side to the door. I opened it for her before following her inside.

We’re seated and left with menus. Our server, Sally, comes over with water and

coffee. She fills our cups and leaves to give us time to look at the menu.

“I’m sorry Ruby. I didn’t intend to ghost you. When I woke up. I panicked. I feel like I betrayed Evie. She’s the only woman I’ve ever been with. The only woman I’ve ever kissed until you. I know that it’s not you, it’s me. It’s a cliché, but it’s true in this case and I’m sorry, from the bottom of my heart. I hope we can be friends.”

Lorey came back to take our orders. I choose steak and eggs with buckwheat pancakes. Ruby orders biscuits and gravy with hash browns.

Ruby

I wait until Lorey takes our order to respond to Effrem’s apology. I’ve imagined this moment a hundred different ways the last couple weeks.

“I can’t say your disappearance didn’t hurt. My soon to be ex is the only man I’d been with prior to our night. I’m not thrilled with a forced one-night stand, but I do understand that you suffered a significant loss. One that affects every aspect of your life.

“I’ll try to be friends, but I like you more than a friend. Also, friends don’t ghost each other.”

“Fair enough.”

“Now, how can I help you?”

“My housekeeper is gone for the holidays. I sent her and her husband, my foreman, on vacation. I can cook, but not enough to take care of my family. My daughter arranged for her boyfriend, his parents, and her brothers to all come to the ranch with her.

“They’re staying for twelve days. I’ll need help cooking and keeping the house. The kids will want some of their favorite dishes. Dee keeps her recipe box in the kitchen. I’ll pay you to shop, cook, and help keep the house. There’s a local maid service I’m calling to do the heavy lifting on the cleaning.”

Our food arrived, giving me time to collect my thoughts. I’m still aiming to open the bakery on January first. Thanks to Roger’s latest move, I need the money.

“I’ll do it, but I still plan on opening the bakery first of the year.”

“What’s left to be done?”

“The walls need a second coat, and the bathroom needs new tile. Other than that. all the seating needs to be put in place and the cases need a final cleaning.”

“I’ll hire someone to do all that.”

“I have a lot of test baking to do and opening day falls on day eleven.”

“I’ll help you as much as I can. You can test bake at the ranch. It’s not Cece’s kitchen, but it’s got professional grade appliances and two double ovens. Dee asked if she could remodel it a few years ago. Anything to make her job easier. I said yes.”

“When can I see the kitchen?”

“Why don’t you pack? I’ll meet you at your apartment after I check in with the office. You can check the recipes and decide what you want to make. Everyone's coming in tomorrow morning. We’ll stop by Molly’s for gingerbread pancakes.”

“I’ll plan to cook from lunch on then. Do you have any holiday traditions with the kids?”

“They used to make cookies.”

“I’ll look for the recipes. I can plan and go shopping this afternoon.”

We enjoy breakfast while keeping the conversation light. After we finish eating, I head home while he heads back to the station.

### Chapter 18

Effrem

I head back into the office. Trixie looks at me with a smile on her face.

“Did you have a nice breakfast, Chief?”

“Don’t get any ideas in your head. Everyone is coming here since I can’t make it out east and I gave Dee and Clay two weeks off. They’re on a cruise.”

“No, ideas sheriff. I just thought it was nice you and Ruby went to breakfast. She’s a nice lady.”

“She is. She’s going to help me out at the house while everyone is here.”

“That’s nice of her Chief. You’re in a real pickle.”

“Tell me something, I don’t know, Trixie.”

I didn't wait for a response. I'm sure she had lots of news I didn't know. Bless her heart. Trixie likes to gossip almost as much as Sally Anne. Only Trixie has access to all the police scuttlebutt.

With a sigh I settle down in the chair and open up the computer. I have a little time while Ruby packs for the stay. I pull up my contact list and make a few calls while I wait. Twenty minutes later I have a cleaning crew for the ranch and a crew to take care of the bakery.

The town is excited about having a bakery in town again. They're willing to help to get the doors open. Especially when I explain my predicament and the fact that Ruby is saving my ass. Deputy Aaron Jeffries stuck his head in my door.

"Effrem. Debbie wanted to know if you're picking up Buck."

I swore a blue streak. I can't believe I forgot to pick up Buck.

"Yup, I'm on my way. I need you to escort Ruby to Busted Knuckle."

That's the name of my ranch. And I busted several getting it up and running.

"Sure thing, Chief."

I cringe, but let it go. Trixie is rubbing off on everyone with that damn Chief moniker. I shut down the computer, pick up my keys, and put on my hat.

"I'm going to pick up Buck and get him settled. Then I have to go to the ranch."

"I'll hold down the fort, Chief. No worries."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Instead I nod my head in acknowledgement and head



out the door. I hurry to the ER center. Once again parking in the reserved spot. I rush inside to the reception desk. They point me down the hall to a room. I find Debbie inside sitting in a chair next to Buck, who's fast asleep.

"I'm so sorry. Jessi dropped a little bomb that left me reeling."

"Oh no. Is everything alright?"

"It is. Thanks to a friend bailing me out. I haven't had time to write you a check for your pay. I'll get it sent over by tonight."

Debbie smiles and shakes her head. "No worries, sheriff. I know you'll get to it as soon as possible."

I reach into my wallet and pull out two hundred in cash.

"You can start with this. Tillie is home from school, so she can watch him if you need to run errands. I have no idea what his pantry and fridge look like."

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She nods her head. "I'll take care of it."

I nod, making a mental note to call Settler's Pantry and have someone deliver a couple day's worth of food. I don't want to step on any toes. No doubt Tillie and Buck had plans. Likely, Tillie. She's sixteen going on sixty.

Tillie was six when Ava died. She had a pulmonary embolism. My Clyde, who'd lost his mom six years previously, took Tillie under his wing. He unofficially adopted her as his little sister. He talks on the phone more to her than he does with me. Not surprising. They're closer in age and have a bond that most people don't understand.

Oh hell. In all the fuss, I haven't called the parents. I wonder if Jessi has? They normally spend the holidays on a cruise. A tradition they started five years ago. Mom wanted to go someplace tropical for the holidays. Pops took her on a cruise.

"Is he ready, Debbie?"

"He is. I ordered a van. It'll be easier than putting him in that big ass truck of yours."

I laugh. "True. I'll follow you. All squared away here?"

She smiles and nods her head. "I am. Let me get the orderlies. Center rules. They have to put him in a wheelchair. He'll likely nod off as soon as we move him. He's on some good meds."

Debbie picks up the phone in the room and speaks to someone. A few minutes later, two burley orderlies come in. One of them is pushing a wheelchair. Debbie steps to

the bed and gently wakes up Buck.

“Mr. Bennett, are you ready to go home?”

“Ah, yep.” Is all he said before his eyes closed again.

“Debbie. If you have this, let me head to Buck’s and give Tillie a heads up before she sees her dad.”

“Good idea. We have his address on file.”

“It’s pretty easy to find. Call me if you need anything.”

I hand her a card with the official cell on it. Right now it’s routed to my phone. Makes it easier for me. I hate carrying two cell phones.

“See you soon, Sheriff, and thank you for everything.”

“You’re welcome. Believe me. You’re doing me the favor.”

She smiles and waves me out of the room. I head outside, knowing the twenty-minute drive may not be long enough to talk to my parents. I put it off until later.

Lost in thought, the drive went by in a blur. Tillie was out the door, across the porch and down the steps before I could open the door of the truck. She throws herself into my arms, tears streaming down her face.

“Is he dead?”

My heart plummets. I hug her fiercely.

“Oh no, sweetheart. I should have called first. I’m so sorry. He’s hurt. Broken leg.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes. His leg is broken in three places. Debbie Goodwin is staying here for two weeks to get your dad through the worst of it.”

“I can take care of Pops, Uncle Eff.”

“I know you can. But do you want to?”

I hold up my hand when she started to talk.

“Do you want to help him use the bathroom? Help him get in and out of the shower? Scratch that. The first two weeks, he’ll likely get sponge baths. How do you feel about washing, EVERYTHING?”

“I’m so glad Debbie’s going to be here to help. Does she cook?”

“She does. I didn’t ask, but her mom is likely keeping her kids.”

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“We have plenty of room here. She doesn’t need to be away from her kids during the holidays.”

“We should run it by your dad.”

“We could, but he’s likely knocked out on pain meds, right?” She shrugs. “Do things now. Ask permission later. I’ll take the heat. Hell, I’ll throw myself under the bus if she can help me figure out how to make stroopwafels?”

“Why the sudden interest in stroopwafels?”

“A could make something up, but we both know that’s not my style. Plus, you won’t rat me out unless you see me or someone else in danger. Same as any other teenager in this town. Unless, It’s different because I’m your niece.”

I shake my head. You don’t need to be blood to be family. Buck and Ben Bennett are like brothers to me. We grew up together. Although Buck is a handful of years younger than Ben and I. We’re both fifty-five.

“Does this young man have a name?”

“I’ll let you know,” she says with a smirk.

I laugh.

“I’m having Settlers deliver a couple days’ worth of food. That’ll give you and Debbie time to decide on the menu. I’ll call Settlers and have them set up an account.

The department will take care of it until your dad is back on his feet.”

“That’s nice of you, Uncle Eff.”

I smile and shake my head. “We have a fund for this kind of thing. It’s one of the reasons we have the fundraisers.”

“I always wondered.”

“Your dad and Debbie will be here in a few minutes. Is there anything you need from me before I go?”

“Guess you’re not going to see Jessi.”

“No, but she’s coming here. So is Clyde.”

“Clyde’s coming home?” Her whole face lights up.

“He’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

“Can I tag along?”

“You can. Debbie will be here to take care of your dad. And that will give you a break from him.”

She laughs. “I do need those now and again. I’ll make the downstairs guest room ready, right after I get to dad’s room.”

“I’ll let Debbie know about the kids, the food, and you coming with me tomorrow.”

She throws her arms around my neck in another hug before turning and heading back

into the house.

I wait by my truck for the van from the hospital to arrive. I help get Buck out and into the house.

“His room is downstairs. Tillie is getting it ready. Debbie, she'd like you to bring the kids to the ranch for the holidays. Your mom can come too. I know it's just the two of you.”

“Are you sure?” She asks, her voice thick with emotion.

I don't need to see the tears to know that they are there or the gratitude shining in her eyes to know she's thankful. I'd seen it earlier when I offered her the job. Tillie takes after her mother. She has a heart of gold. Instead of being worried about a woman taking over her domain, she asks her to bring her family.

It takes about twenty more minutes to get Buck squared away before I can head home. Once I'm in the truck, I decide it's as good a time as any to call my parents.

## Chapter 19

Ruby

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I can't decide what to wear. Am I a friend helping out? Am I "the help"? Should I wear a uniform? Ahh, hell. After Effrem gives me the rundown, I'll run back out to Calico Gypsy's for some new clothes.

Thanks to her generous discount and a few online sales, I have money for new clothes. Selling all those designer clothes I'll never wear again was one of my better ideas. Clothes, shoes, purses. I kept a few of each, but put most of it up for sale.

A knock on my door has me sprinting across the apartment. I opened it to find Deputy Jeffries. He smiles and touches the brim of his hat.

"Miss Ruby. The sheriff got called away. Asked me to escort you to the ranch."

"Deputy Jeffries, I'm not ready yet and could stand to run an errand. Could you possibly give me directions?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He digs a set of keys out of his pocket and hands them to me before giving me directions. I write them down on a phone app and thank him again. Now I have plenty of time. I head to the bathroom and finish packing my toiletries before filling half my suitcase. I'd have to come back here for part of the day, most days, anyway.

Satisfied with my selections, I hurry downstairs, locking both doors behind me before loading my bags into the Suburban. I pull out of the parking lot and head straight for the clothing store. Gypsy is behind the counter. She waves and smiles.



“Ruby. It’s good to see you.”

“Thank you, Gypsy. It’s good to see you too. I’m in need of some help.”

“What can I do?”

I told her about helping out Effrem and my lack of appropriate clothing. I hardly need a designer cocktail dress in the bakery. One whirlwind of an hour later, the back of my SUV is full of bags containing clothes, shoes, belts, jewelry, and other accessories. Two bags of that are new underwear, including a few pieces of lingerie. Why not? What I wear behind closed doors is my business. I don’t need an excuse to wear something that makes me feel good. Not anymore.

The drive to Effrem’s ranch is scenic. As is most of the driving around Wolf Creek. I fell in love with it via pictures. And the pictures don’t do it justice. It’s breathtaking, with open fields and pastures on both sides and the mountains rising off in the distance.

As I draw closer to the Busted Knuckle Ranch. I see a field of longhorn cattle. I’ve only seen them before on screen. Half a mile later, a herd of horses streak across a pasture heading toward the mountains.

I have to pull over, so I don’t wreck. I watch them until they are out of sight. I feel lighter than I have in forever. Back on the road and a few minutes later, I’m pulling into the driveway. It’s not a short drive by any means. but it’s not nearly as long as the Bennetts. I park near the house and walk to the front door. I try the door, surprised to find it open. Maybe people don’t lock their doors around here.

I let myself in.

“Hello, is anyone home?”

When I don't get a response, I begin to walk around the house. The front door opens into a foyer area with tall ceilings and stone floors. There's a bench on the wall on one side. The house opens up from there with soaring ceilings. Wooden beams cross the ceiling. A large chandelier made of antlers hangs from the center of the ceiling.

Leather furniture surrounds a low, round coffee table that takes up the center of the room. There's a fireplace on one side of the room. With a natural stone chimney.

It's an open floor plan with the dining room on one side. A teakwood table that sits ten. A gold table runner splits the middle of the table in half. Beyond the table is a wall of windows with a set of French doors that opens onto a patio.

I can spruce it up for Christmas with ease. I walk past the table and into the kitchen. The kitchen is a dream with marble countertops, dark wooden cabinets, an enormous island, and a pot filler on the stove.

It has two double ovens. Upon closer inspection, I see they both have a convection setting. The island has a small sink with a faucet and an opening for garbage. I walk through the kitchen, opening all the cabinets and checking out the dishes, pots, and pans.

I want to be as familiar as possible with the kitchen since I'm cooking for eight people. Well, seven, and then me. I still don't know my exact position, but Gypsy put me at ease about needing a uniform.

After searching the cabinets, fridge and freezer, I find a pantry. A walk-in pantry big enough to store food, seasonal dishes, and just about every extra you could need, like bread and picnic baskets.

The sound of boots on the stone floor alerts me to the presence of another person.

“Ruby?”

“I’m in the pantry.”

The sound of boots draws closer. I turn to see Effrem walk through the pantry door.

“Familiarizing yourself with the work space I see.”

“I am. I’m going to load up a bunch of pans and baking supplies this afternoon when I go grocery shopping.”

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“Let me get you the recipe box along with Dee’s notebook. She keeps a list of everyone’s favorites. Speaking of. My parents are coming. They’ll be here tomorrow by lunchtime.”

I take the new information in stride and follow Effrem out of the kitchen. He goes to an old Hoosier cabinet sitting in the corner and pulls out a wooden recipe box and a worn spiral notebook. He hands both to me.

### Chapter 20

Effrem

I bring up my parents' contact information and start with their home phone. Yes, they still have one. My dad picks up on the second ring.

“Son.”

“Pops, how are you?”

“We’re doing good, son. How are you?” Mom asks, picking up the other phone.

She’s probably in the kitchen.

“I just finished the breakfast dishes and put a roast in for supper. When are you going to come for a visit?”

“I can come after the holidays, Ma. Are you going on a cruise this year?”

“No, son,” Dad says.

“We decided to stay home this year.” Mom adds.

“Jessi is coming home this year with a special someone. She’s bringing his parents.”

“Will the boys be there?” Mom asks.

“Yes, they’re all coming in tomorrow morning.”

“We’ll be there for lunch. Tell Dee to make our favorites.”

The call ended before I could tell them that Dee and Clay are away on vacation. God, please help me make it through the next two weeks.

Ruby’s vehicle is parked out front by the time I pull in the driveway. I go through the front door and call her name. When I don’t get a response, I walk through the house.

I call out again.

“I’m in the pantry.”

I walk to the pantry and find Ruby looking at all the shelves.

I smile. “Familiarizing yourself with the work space I see.”

“I am. I’m going to load up a bunch of pans and baking supplies this afternoon when I go grocery shopping.”

“Let me get you the recipe box, along with Dee’s notebook. She keeps a list of everyone’s favorites. Speaking of. My parents are coming. They’ll be here tomorrow

by lunchtime.”

I took the new information in stride and follow Effrem out of the kitchen. I go to the old Hoosier cabinet and pull out a wooden recipe box and a worn spiral notebook. I hand both to Ruby.

“Mom requested her favorites. I know Dee has them written in the book. I’m afraid Dee handles everything. I’m of little use with who loves what.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“Oh hell. I should invite Evie’s parents to a few meals. They’re local. No worries about them being underfoot twenty-four-seven. Also, don’t feel you have to make nothing but favorites or even favorites every meal. Lunch tomorrow and a few things on Christmas is enough of an imposition. It’s also late in the season. I don’t know how picked over the store is. We have plenty of beef and pork in the big freezer. It’s in the garage. I can show you where it is, then I’ll give you a tour.”

Ruby

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Effrem led me to the garage that boasted a walk-in freezer and a walk-in fridge. A walk-in fridge. Unfortunately, it's currently empty as the household was expected to be empty for the next two weeks.

I have a feeling I'll be taking a long drive to a bigger city as soon as we've finished the tour. The freezer is well stocked. I'll come back later and take inventory before I head out shopping. He leads me back through the second foyer. This one is behind the pantry. This foyer has access to the kitchen at two points, the garage door, a laundry room, a craft room, and the end of it is a set of French doors that leads to an outdoor living area.

It's a large space that leads to a pool and hot tub area. There's an outdoor kitchen. Another area with an outdoor gas fireplace and beyond that, a set of outdoor table and chairs that leads out of the dining area.

The other end contains the Master Suite, including a to die for walk-in closet and a smaller bedroom with an ensuite bathroom.

"This is the bedroom you'll be using. The rest of the bedrooms are upstairs. You can see them now or when you're done shopping. I'm sorry I can't go with you. I have to get back to the office."

"Effrem. We should exchange numbers in case I need to get a hold of you."

He nods his head. "May I have your phone?"

I hand him my phone. He puts in his number, then sends a text to his phone. He then

pulls out a card and hands it to me.

“That’s attached to the ranch. No spending limit. Get whatever you need to make this a wonderful holiday.”

“We need a tree.”

He shakes his head. “The kids and I will get it tomorrow after lunch. It’s usually a family thing. We hook up the horses and take the wagon or sleigh if there’s snow.”

“I’ll make hot drinks and snacks for the trip.”

“Good call.”

“Thanks.”

I watch him walk away. Leaving me in the hall outside our rooms. I enjoy every second of the view. He has one fine jean clad ass. I’ve had my hands on that fine specimen, naked. I let out a sigh. Too bad I’ll never lay hands on it again, but I respect his wishes.

First thing I do is take out my own notebook and look over everything. Nothing too complicated and I have plenty of ideas on family events, thanks to Dee’s notes. She was with the family from the start.

I jot down several ideas before heading to the freezer and taking inventory.

Chapter 21

Ruby



I'm jamming down the road to a local country station. When it goes out, I'll switch to a satellite station. I have a ninety-minute drive to a market I found on-line a few weeks ago. It's part of a community that grows aquaponic crops all year round. They have their own butcher and cheese makers as well.

I put in a call to Dutch earlier for cherries and honey. He's going to drop it off at the sheriff's office this afternoon when he makes his weekly trip into town. Tomorrow's menu is easy. I'm making chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, corn bread, fried okra, black-eyed peas, cream gravy, and pecan pie.

I have steaks defrosting for Effrem and I tonight. I plan on getting a ton of baking supplies while I'm here. I have the second and third row seats folded flat for maximum storage capacity.

Jelly Roll's Save Me comes on. I crank it up and sing along. While I never faced drug addiction, I do know what it's like to feel you're at the end of your rope. Roger is somehow forging my signature on papers that never existed. I don't have the money to hire a private investigator or hire another attorney. Mine is okay, but Roger has an entire team. I could use an attorney from a top-notch law firm.

I refuse to let him take anymore of my life. I let fear take the last sixteen years. I should've left long ago. I remind myself that I can't change the past. I can only learn from it and move on. I find the market easy enough and even snag a close parking spot.

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It's dark by the time I pull in front of the ranch house. A few ranch hands surprise me, running out to unload the Suburban. I shew them away when they ask to help put everything up. If I do it, then I'll know where it is when it's time to use it.

Effrem sent me a text earlier, letting me know he'd be late. Which, it turns out, is perfect timing. By the time I get everything put away, I have time to throw together a salad, bake potatoes in the convection oven and pull the steaks from the fridge to rest. I'll throw them on the grill when Effrem gets home.

With the salad finished and ready to toss, I make a quick vinaigrette using some ponzu fruit I found earlier today. Once that's done, I head to my room for the next two weeks and take a quick shower.

I'm planning on crashing after dinner, so I dress in yoga pants, an oversized tee, and slip on tennis shoes. I leave my hair loose and decide on a bralet versus a bra. I'm well-endowed and only go without a bra to bathe and sleep. Even my swimsuit has a built-in bra.

I'm headed back to the kitchen when I hear Effrem calling my name.

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“Headed to the kitchen.” I say loud enough for him to hear.

At least I hope he heard me. He did. Effrem enters the kitchen through the second door.

“I’ll have dinner ready in a few minutes. I just need to throw the steaks on the grill.”

“I can do that.”

“I like mine medium-rare, please. I’ll get the table set while you grill. Would you like beer or some wine?”

“Beer.”

I set the table, toss the salad and get us both a drink. I put a glass of ice water by each setting. A St. Pauli Girl for him and a glass of red wine for me. I pour the vinaigrette into a small glass pitcher I found and put on the stopper. I set out sour cream, fresh chopped chives, chopped thick cut bacon, and shredded cheese before grabbing the potatoes and putting them in a warming basket.

Effrem brings the steaks back inside. He used the outdoor grill. He brings the platter to the table and sits it between us.

“Ladies first he says.”

I chose the smaller steak and baked potato. There’s no way I’ll finish both of these, much less the bigger ones. I heap my plate full of salad. All the women's jokes aside,

I love the stuff. I'd put fresh herbs in it to give it a little pizzazz. By the time I drizzled some dressing on my salad, Effrem had taken his steak and was loading his baked potato.

"You didn't have to go to all this trouble."

I shrug my shoulders. "I have to eat too. Making food for two is just as easy. I couldn't resist a good steak after seeing your freezer."

"Did you get everything you need?"

"I did, but I'm going back closer to New Year's Eve to get lobsters."

"They have lobsters?"

"Shrimp and fish too. It's all grown in aquaponics. They use the fish to fertilize the plants. They also have a few larger tanks for lobsters and shrimp. I'd say they are about ninety percent as tasty as the fresh lobster from Main."

"Are you a foodie Ruby Buffet?"

"Cline, and yes I am."

"Ruby Cline?"

"Yes, I'm taking my name back." I laugh. "Roger thinks insisting on it is doing me some harm. I'm thankful to give it back."

"How's the divorce going?"

I wince.

“That bad?”

“He doesn’t want to pay me a dime, but I didn’t break the prenup. He did. Only the original prenup has disappeared and so did the word of me getting half if he cheats.”

“Where is the original?”

I blush. “I have it. It’s here with me. I don’t feel safe leaving it around. Not that I have the money to do anything about it.”

“What figure is he offering you?”

“He wants to pay me nothing. Literally. He wants a dissolution of marriage where I get what I walked away with. Basically my clothes, some kitchen stuff, a few family heirlooms and the car.”

“May I see the papers and the prenup?”

“Let me grab them.”

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Of all the things I imagined talking to Effrem about tonight, my divorce wasn't one of them. I hurry to my room and grab the papers. When I get back, I hand them to him and resume eating dinner while he reads over the papers."

"How much does he lose if you get half?"

"Three hundred and seventy-five million."

He whistles. "That's a chunk of change. No wonder he's playing dirty."

"Thing is, I agreed to sign the divorce papers for five million. That's two-hundred and fifty thousand a year for the twenty years we were married. A pittance compared to what he owes me, according to the original prenup. I didn't ask for half the house, businesses, art, cars, or collectables. He can have it all.

"Honestly, it's more about the point than the money. I've watched him throw away money at every bimbo and hooker that looks in his direction for the last decade. During that time, I got a job. Though I never heard the end of it. A Buffet wife working was unconscionable according to my in-laws. I put every dime I had back along with part of my "allowance". I had to spend most of that on clothes. He likes to keep up appearances."

"What about all the jewelry he bought you?"

"It's in a safe deposit box in Indiana. I have the key. He can have it after the divorce is final."

“He doesn’t want you to have the jewelry he bought you over the last two decades?”

I shake my head. “Not even my engagement ring or wedding band. He wants it all. I didn’t argue. I’m done. I want him to be out of my life for good. The quickest way to do that was to give him what he wanted. My attorney just rolled over and didn’t even ask for lube when his team fucked me over.”

Effrem surprised me by reaching across the table and putting his hand over mine.

“That’s not right Ruby. You deserve something after all that time.”

I can think of a dozen things to say, but I don’t want to ruin the moment. I don’t want him to take his hand from mine.

“Thank you.” I say, softly.

We spend the rest of dinner talking about the impending arrival of his family. When we’re done, he insists on cleaning up. Exhausted from the long day, I don’t argue. I head to my room, strip out of my clothes, and slip under the covers.

## Chapter 22

Effrem

I’m up at three, like every morning. Jeffries is taking over for me today while I handle the family. Instead of doing cardio like I normally do, I head to the attic and bring down all the holiday decorations. I told Dee not to bother this year since the children were all gone and I know what a chore it is for her.

By the time I get everything down, I have time for a cup of coffee to go and to grab Ruby’s papers. I texted Gillian last night. She’s going to look over the case and likely

take it. She'll wait to get payment until after she takes Roger to the cleaners.

I have thirty minutes to spare by the time I arrive at Gillian's office. I'm surprised she fit me in so soon, but the name peaked,her interest. She rises from behind the desk to greet me.

"Would you like some to drink?"

"Coffee, one cream."

She raises an eyebrow. "Since when do you like cream?"

I smile at her as long as we've known each other, I've only ever taken my coffee black.

"A man can change."

"Maybe a man can, but you're not just any man."

I shrug my shoulders. She waits until her assistant brings us coffee and closes the door.

"Let me see the papers. I'd love to get something good on Buffets. Roger's family, not Warrens." She adds with a laugh.

I hand her the file with Ruby's papers in it. She indicates I should have a seat and goes around to her chair. After a few minutes, she looks up.

"How did you come to know Ruby?"



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“She’s opening a bakery in Wolf Creek. She’s currently bailing my ass out.”

I briefly explain the Christmas situation. Gillian takes it all in.

“You like her.”

“What?! Where the hell did that come from.”

“She’s the cream in your coffee.”

I bite back the denial. She gasps.

“Oh, my God! You slept with her.”

I hang my head. Shame washing over me. I hear her move before I feel her hand on my shoulder.

“Effrem Dalton James, you stop that right now. Evie wouldn’t be happy about you being ashamed of caring for someone else.”

“It wasn’t caring. It was sex.”

“Was it? You wouldn’t have had sex with her unless you have feelings. If that’s the case, you’d have had sex long before now.”

“I’m not ready to have this conversation with you or anyone, including myself. Do you think you can help her?”

I held Gillian's gaze. She's two years younger than I am with skin a few shades darker and lavender blue eyes. She's absolutely stunning. Everyone assumed we would get together, but it's never been like that with us. We're good friends, best friends.

"Yes, I can help her. This prenup is ironclad and screws him to the wall if what you say is true. I'll get my PI's on it immediately. I'm filing for an emergency injunction and petitioning to move the divorce here. There's no doubt in my mind these papers were on file at some point. He has someone on the inside willing to break the law. I have a contact with the Feds."

"Thank you, Gill."

"Hey, I've got your back. Now, when do I get to meet Ruby?"

"Why don't you come by for dinner tonight. I'll let Ruby know we're having one more. I think you'll like her."

"If she has you this twisted on top of bailing your ass out, I already like her. Now go get my kids."

I laugh. Gillian is my kids god-mother. She's been there for Jessi more times than I can count. Sometimes a girl needs another woman around. I hug her again before heading downstairs to the cafe to pick up Tillie. I sent her in for a drink and a snack while I took care of business.

She has her nose buried in her phone.

"Ready?"

She looks up with a smile. "I'm ready."

Twenty minutes later, we're waiting by the luggage carousel for everyone to arrive. They're coming from three different flights. All arriving within minutes of each other. I don't know how my daughter managed that miracle.

Dalton is the first to arrive. He has a ranch outside of Taos, New Mexico. His face lit up when he saw Tillie beside me. He hugs her first.

"Squirt, you're all grown up."

She laughs, then her face gets serious. "Don't call me that in front of your brother."

Dalton smiles. "Yes, ma'am."

I laugh at their antics. Clyde arrives next. He looks surprised to see Tillie.

"Tillie, you came to welcome me home."

She smiles and hurries to him. I get his luggage off the conveyor while they talk. A few minutes later, Jessi arrives with her boyfriend and his parents. The kid's tall. He has me by three inches putting him at six-five or close to it.

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Jessi's face lights up when she sees me. Finally, one of my kids is excited. She runs to me, throwing her arms around my neck. I hug her tight and spin her around. Kissing the top of her head before I put her down.

"Daddy, I want you to meet Kai and his parents, Xavier and Maya King."

I held out my hand and shook Kai and Xavier's hands. Maya King had other ideas and enveloped me in an embrace. Jessi introduces Tillie, Clyde and Dalton to the Kings.

"I hope you're all hungry. Ruby's going to prepare some of your favorites."

"Who's Ruby?" Clyde asks.

"Where's Dee?" Jessi asks at the same time.

"Dee is on a cruise. I sent her and Clay on a two-week cruise when I thought I was coming out East. Ruby is the new bakery owner and a lifesaver. She's agreed to help us out for the holidays."

Clyde starts laughing like crazy the moment he spots the church van. It's one of those big fifteen passenger vans.

"Is that the church van?"

"It is. It's the biggest vehicle I have access to that's going to fit everyone and their luggage."

The ride back to the ranch is pleasant, with the kids filling most of the time with chatter, catching up. Tille says Debbie is taking good care of her dad and that her kids came first thing this morning with their grandmother. Buck is still out of it, but I don't think he'll care.

## Chapter 23

Ruby

I'm making chicken fried steak tonight instead of for lunch. For lunch, I'm making something lighter. Along with a couple pitchers of sweet tea and sangria.

Tonight, alongside the tea, I'll serve whiskey sours, long island ice teas, and beer. A few cocktails should help ease any tensions and loosen up everyone enough to enjoy the holidays. After today, I'll get a better grasp on everyone and what they might want at meal times.

I found a section in the notebook about holiday decorations. Dee is very organized. After I've pounded out steaks and have them marinating, I begin to unpack the boxes and set up the decorations.

I put on Christmas music and sang and danced while I unpack the boxes. I'd made good headway when I heard a vehicle door close. I hurried to the kitchen to put out snacks. I have a cheeseboard, a snack meat tray, pecan rolls and banana nut muffins. Beside that I set ice water with slices of lemon and lime, fresh squeezed orange juice and fresh squeezed grapefruit juice.

"Ruby."

"In the kitchen."

“Something sure smells good.” A younger version of Effrem says walking into the kitchen.

“I hope it tastes good, too.”

Effrem walks into the kitchen next, followed by his other children and three more people. I’ve seen pictures of the kids on the walls. The other three must be the Kings. Effrem introduces everyone. I stir the soup while everyone has a snack.

“What’s for lunch?” Clyde asks.

Effrem ruffles his hair. “That’s my boy, always thinking with his stomach.”

“I made loaded baked potato soup and lobster bisque. I’m making onion burgers, cheese stuffed yeast rolls, and cheddar biscuits to go with it.”

Dalton comes and throws an arm around my shoulder.

“I think we should keep her.”

I blush and laugh. While Dalton is only a few years younger than me, his dad, Effrem, has my complete and total attention.

Effrem

I can’t believe I feel a pang of jealousy when my son puts his arm around Ruby’s shoulders. The realization that I want to be that comfortable with her hits me like a ton of bricks. I fight the urge to head to the barn and check on the horses. Evie would give me some time before she followed me out and we talked. She was always good about knowing when I had something to say, but didn’t know how to say it.

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I was surprised to see half the decorations were up in their usual spots. Ruby is a miracle worker. Not to mention the house smells amazing. Even Dee would approve.

“Ruby, everything looks wonderful, and thank you for starting the decorations.”

“Dee has it all written in that magic notebook of hers. I used it to place things as I unpacked.”

“Let’s get it knocked out before lunch.” Jessi says.

My parents arrive to a flurry of happy squeals and hugs. Everyone pitches in, the Kings and Ruby taking directions as we decorate the house for Christmas. All that’s left is to get the tree. Which we’ll go do after lunch.

I help Ruby with the onion burgers. She’s easy to talk to. Clyde comes out with us. I can see he’s taken with Ruby. She has him laughing and I wonder why she’s never had kids. Maybe Roger didn’t want any. I wait until my son is inside to say anything.

“You’re fantastic with kids.”

“Thank you. I always wanted a bunch, but it wasn’t in the cards for me.”

The sadness in her eyes makes me want to take her in my arms and make everything alright. I resist the urge for all of ten seconds before I give her a hug.

“I’m sorry, Ruby.”

She shakes her head. “Not your fault, Effrem. Unless you wish someone you’ve never met to be sterile.”

“Aww, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.”

“Did you consider adoption?”

“Roger didn’t want a child that wasn’t biologically his.”

“You could have used a surrogate.”

“I suggested that too. I don’t know why he wouldn’t go for it but he didn’t.”

“You’re not too old to adopt now.”

“You think it's okay as a single parent.”

“Some kids don’t have any parents at all.”

“True. Thank you, Effrem.”

“Anytime you need to talk, I’ve been told I’m a good listener.”

Dalton heads outside with two brews in his hand. “How are those burgers coming? You’ve got some starving kids in here.”

I look down at the grill.

“They’re ready to come off. Grab me a platter.”

“I need to go get the last of the cheese rolls from the oven.” Ruby says, sliding past



my son.

“Everything alright with her dad?”

“She’s going through a nasty divorce.”

“That sucks. She seems nice.”

“She is. Let’s get these burgers in there before Clyde starts eating the dishes.”

Lunch goes smashingly well and ends with the Kings trying to lure Ruby back to Connecticut to be their personal chef.

### Chapter 24

Effrem

After lunch ends, I take Clyde with me to hook up the teams. I'm hooking up the wagon for us and the sled for the tree.

"Best put blankets over the hay bales. I think this is the King's first foray into the wilderness." Clyde says with a laugh.

I smile at my boy. "How's school?"

"It's good. I kinda miss home."

"You're welcome home any time. If you want to switch schools and be closer, you can do that too."

"Dad, do you think you'll ever date again?"

What the hell? "What brought that up?"

"Ruby being here. I mean, I know she's filling in for Dee, but it's nice having someone, not Dee, around."

"What's wrong with Dee?"

"Nothing, dad. She's just married and you need someone in your life."

“I’m fine son.”

He shakes his head. “We won’t think any less of you if you fall in love again, dad. Sixteen years is a long time for a memory to keep you warm.”

“Son, when did you get so wise?”

He chuckles. “I have a good example. I’ll go grab blankets.”

We harness up both teams, put blankets over the hay bales and extra for people’s laps. Fat flakes of snow fall down around us.

“I don’t remember the last time we had snow at Christmas, Clyde says.”

“It’s been awhile.”

When we’re all finished, one of the ranch hands watches the horses while we return to the main house to gather everyone. We find everyone gathered in the kitchen. Ruby is packing a huge basket with who knows what.

“Are we ready?”

Ruby hands the basket to me. “You all have fun.”

“You’re going with us.”

“I am?”

“Yes.” Clyde says.

“Definitely,” Dalton adds.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude on family time.”

Jessi throws her arm over Ruby’s shoulders. “Then consider yourself officially adopted. Get your coat.”

Ruby laughs and rushes out of the room. She comes back a few minutes later dressed for the weather.

“Ruby, sit beside dad on the bench.” Dalton suggest

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I help her up before getting up myself and taking the reins. Clyde is driving the sled. Jessi and Dalton get the King's settle and we're off. The air is crisp. Fat snowflakes continue to fall as we traverse through the pasture and into the woods.

"Effrem, it's beautiful out here. How do you ever leave it?"

I smile. "It's tough some days. God sure did a fine job creating this part of the country."

She nods and smiles. "I agree. I'm so thankful I found the bakery here. Even in town, it's better than being in the big city. I love that people stop by and introduce themselves daily, even though I'm not open. It makes me feel welcome."

"You are welcome here, Ruby. The town is glad to have you, and so am I."

I glance at her to see her reaction. Her cheeks color a pretty pink.

"Thank you, Effrem."

"No need to thank me for telling the truth. Say, I almost forgot to tell you we have one more for dinner tonight. A friend of mine is coming and I want you to meet her."

"I made extra just in case someone was extra hungry. I've got her covered."

"You're the bomb."

"I think that's the GOAT, now."

I hear Jessi snigger. “She’s got you there, Dad.”

“Are you listening in?”

“Hard not too. We’re all in the same vehicle.”

“Remind me to hop all your kids up on sugar before I send them home.”

“Dad!”

I heard masculine chuckles and turned my head to see Dalton, Kai, and Xavier laughing. Jessi swats Kai on the arm.

“Hey, they might be your kids too, ya know.”

The young man smiles and I turn my attention back on the path ahead.

Ruby

The ride through Effrem’s property is breathtaking. I fell in love with it immediately. His family has embraced me as if I’m one of their own or dating their dad. I’m only here to help facilitate the holiday. They are fun to be around though, and it makes me realize what I missed out on by staying with Roger so long.

What can I say I’m not a quitter? Honestly, part of it was I was determined to make one marriage work. My mom’s had five and dad is on number three. Each marriage seems more miserable than the last.

The ride takes about thirty minutes. We all get down from the wagon and Effrem tells Jessi to pick the tree. A Bass family tradition, Jessi picks out the tree every year and the men cut it down and bring it back. Everyone decorates after dinner. I made eggnog

for the occasion.

In hindsight, I realize I made the holiday alcohol heavy, or at least alcohol available. So far, everyone's enjoyed a glass of sangria or a bottle of wine. No one's throwing drama or causing shade. It's a refresher from the holidays with my family or with the Buffets.

"First we make snow angels." Jessi declares dropping to the ground and beginning to make her angel.

I laugh and join her. It's cold but fun as I move my arms and legs making her skirt and sleeves.

"Don't forget your halo." Jessi says popping up.

I watch her with envy before I sit up. I'll have to get on my hands and knees before I stand up. Dalton surprises me by stepping carefully to the edge of my angel and offering his hand. I take it and he hauls me to my feet.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

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The words no sooner leave his mouth than a snowball hits him in the back of the head. He turns to see Clyde guffawing loudly. What soon ensues is the best snowball fight of my life. I'm being hit from all directions. Laughing, I take to the trees to gather ammunition. I make an armful before I'm found. I don't know who fires first, but I fire back and run. Dodging behind trees and throwing widely. I don't see Effrem before I collide with him. We go down in a tangle of limbs with him on top of me. Our mouths are not even an inch apart. You can see our breaths as we pant. Both from exertion and from the chemistry that explodes the moment our eyes meet.

A snowball to Effrem's head breaks the spell of the moment. He gets to his knees, then helps me up. We return fire before I hear someone call halt. We're all a wet, cold, happy mess.

"I have spiked hot chocolate in the basket."

"Yay!" Several people yell.

I laugh and make my way to the basket.

"Dad, I know what tree I want."

Jessi pointed out the tree. The Bass men get the chainsaws out and go to work while I serve everyone else a mug full of hot cocoa.

"Oh my. This is the best cocoa I've tasted. Are sure we can't steal you away?"

I shake my head. "I think I've finally found a place to call home. Wolf Creek is more



than welcoming. You'll have to move here."

Maya King gave Jessi a look. Jessi, who is busy watching Kai help cut her brothers and father with the tree, doesn't see it.

"That may be in the cards. Jessi wants to move back home after graduation. She dreams of opening up a law firm here in town. Kai's told me he's planning on coming with her."

Wow. That's a lot to process. I wonder if Effrem knows the kids are this serious. My heart soars for him. He's so proud of his kids. I could tell by the way he talked about them at breakfast the other day and the way he looks at them now. He'll be thrilled Jessi is moving back home and with a husband to boot. I have little doubt these two are headed down the aisle.

## Chapter 25

Effrem

By the time we make it back and get the tree inside, everyone begs off to take a hot shower, get warmed up and change clothes. To my surprise, less than ten minutes pass before I hear noises coming from the kitchen. I wander in, finding Ruby dancing around to Christmas music and cooking.

"Do you want some help?"

She yelps and drops the bowl in her hands, sending water and raw potatoes all over the floor. The glass bowl shatters into pieces.

"Stay right there and let me get the glass cleaned up."

I look down, surprised to see her bare feet. She shrugs, her cheeks coloring.

“You have heated floors.”

I smile. “I do. Now, don’t move.”

“Yes, Sir,” she says, adding a mock salute.

My hand itches to spank that sassy ass as I go to get the broom and dustpan. It’s in the utility closet, which has a door inside the pantry. The broom, other cleaning tools, and cleaning supplies are kept here. There’s also a shelf with extra laundry supplies. Dee and I like organization. I grab the broom and dustpan and hurry to the kitchen.

Jessi is already in there with towels soaking up the excess water without shards of glass in it.

“That’s my girl.”

Jessi smiles up at me from where she's kneeling.

“I remember mom always barefoot in the kitchen. You’d scold her and tell her you’d spank her ass if she cut herself.”

“And I did too.” I say, matter of factly.

Jessi gasps, then giggles. Ruby turns redder than I’ve ever seen her. My daughter stands up, turning her back to Ruby. She gives me a grin that says she’s about to start trouble.

“Are you going to spank Ruby too?”

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That little shit. Without skipping a beat, I meet their gaze.

“If she moves and cuts herself, yes.”

Jessi squeals and runs out of the room, yelling. “Dad likes a girl.”

I shake my head.

“I think she had too much cocoa,” Ruby says.

Bless her for giving me a way out. I need to get some time alone and sort my head out. Then I need to go see Evie. Nothing more can happen unless I know I have her blessing. No, I’m not crazy. I’m well aware my wife is dead. She’ll tell me what she thinks. She always does. She sends our sign, a red cardinal. They’re rare around these parts.

I make quick work of cleaning the glass and insist on checking Ruby’s feet for cuts before I let her move.

“What are we making?”

“We?”

“Yes, I’m helping make dinner.”

“We’re making chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, corn bread, fried okra, black-eyed peas, cream gravy, and pecan pie. Well, we already made the pecan pies.

They're on the cooling rack."

"How did you do that? We just got back."

"I pulled them out right before we left. I had them in during lunch."

"Woman, you're amazing. Jumping in with both feet and helping me out when I know you have a ton of work to do before the bakery opens."

"What bakery?" Dalton asks.

"Ruby is opening a bakery. Same spot as the old one, but her stuff is better."

"If it's anything like the taste we've had so far, I might be tempted to move back."

"Serious or joking?" I ask.

"Seriously, I'm thinking about selling and finding a local place to buy. I can get two to three times the size of my place in New Mexico. Maybe I'll find a woman of my own and have a passel of kids."

"Are you ready to be grandpa?"

"Son, I'd love nothing more. Let's look at what's around here after dinner."

"Or invite Dustin. He'll know." Ruby says.

"That's a brilliant idea. I'll call him now. You don't mind?"

"I don't. There's plenty. He gave me a great deal on the bakery. The least I can do is repay him by sending him business."

She turns to me. “How are you at peeling potatoes?”

“Pretty, good. I did KP a few times in the Navy.”

## Chapter 26

Ruby

We work side by side for the next hour preparing a feast. I had most of the prep work done before the trip today. I thought I was going to be here. I’d planned on baking a few things. I’ll have to get an earlier start tomorrow morning. I plan on making a trip into town to grab a few baking pans I forgot. Plus, I want to check on the bakery’s progress. I can do all my test baking from this kitchen. Also, I think I’ll get supplies to make fudge. Oh, and candy molds. I found out Maya loves Queen Anne style cherries.

I made a mental note to switch up breakfast. I’ll do rolls and breakfast casserole and side meats. I can make all those ahead of time and keep them warm. If I leave the cleanup until I get back, I can make it into town and get supplies, stop by the bakery, and get back in plenty of time to make lunch.

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I check the black-eyed peas. I put them in the crock pot to cook low and slow all day. They have smoked ham hocks in them. They're perfect. Smiling to myself, I put the cornbread in the oven and get ready to drop the okra.

"Potatoes are ready for you to taste, Chef." Effrem says with a wink.

I smile and grab a spoon. "Oh, these are good. Once we add the grated white cheddar and roasted garlic, they'll be sheer perfection."

"You're making my mouth water." Effrem says with a growl.

Too bad it's my food and not my body making you drool. "That's what you're paying me for."

Before he could respond, we were interrupted by a visitor. Two actually. Dustin Whitebear and perhaps the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She has dark, flawless brown skin. Her hair is natural and surrounds her head like a lion's mane. I always thought the lioness should get the pretty hair. What's most striking is her violet-blue eyes.

She's wearing Gucci jeans, Prada heels and I'm not familiar with the designer of her shirt. It's long-sleeve silk. And the same deep red as her full lips.

"Gilli." Effrem smiles.

He lights up when he sees his friend. Lights up like a freaking Christmas tree. Jealousy stabs at my heart. I mentally shake my head. I have no reason. He made it

clear he doesn't want me. I turn my attention to Dustin. He hurries across the kitchen to give me a hug, then hands me a huge bouquet.

"Beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady."

"Thank you. They're beautiful. Let me run and get something to put them in."

"I'll do it." Clyde says.

"Good to see you, Dustin. Aunt Gilli."

"Ruby, I'd like to introduce you to my best friend Gillian Langtree."

"I've heard of an attorney named Gillian Langtree. Roger's father mentioned her once."

Gillian steps forward and offers her hand. "That's me."

I smile. "Goodness, he does not like you."

"With good reason. I won."

"Willem Buffet doesn't like to lose."

Gillian smiles and shakes her head. "He does not, and I like to make him lose."

"I can see the pleasure in that."

"I didn't know what we were having, so I brought white and red. They're in the car."

"I'll get them Aunt Gilli," Dalton says.

“What can I help with?” Gillian asks.

“We’re starting to put things in the serving dishes.”

Clyde comes back with a beautiful crystal vase. I put the bouquet in it, getting a good look at the flowers for the first time. White roses, red lilies, red and white carnations, red berries and small pine branches.

“These are truly beautiful, Dustin.”

“It’s my pleasure, besides I get to eat your cooking and all I had to do was bring flowers.”

“You can help me make drinks while Effrem and Gillian get everything in serving dishes.”

I take drink orders starting with those in the kitchen and move to the living room where the rest of the family is.



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“Dinner is almost ready. I’m taking drink orders. On special tonight are whiskey sours and Long Island iced teas. We also have German and domestic beer.”

After we take orders, Dustin and I get to work making drinks. By the time we finish, the food is on the table and Effrem calls everyone to dinner.

### Chapter 27

Effrem

Dinner goes amazingly well. The only thing wrong with it is I need to know where Dustin and Ruby stand. I plan on asking him at the soonest possible opportunity. After dinner, Gillian and I are going to update Ruby on the divorce. I hope she’s not mad at me for involving Gillie, but I know if anyone can beat Buffet’s legal team, it’s her.

The boys offer to clean up, including Kai.

“If you’ll excuse us. Gillian and I have some business to discuss with Ruby.”

“You do?” Ruby looks at me, surprised.

“Yes. Would you come to my office with us, please.”

Ruby stands up, uncertainty written across her face.

“It’s nothing bad, I promise.”

She relaxes and I lead us to my office. I take a seat on the couch. Gillian takes the chair next to it. Ruby sits beside me. Gillian opens her briefcase, pulls out a laptop and a file.

“Ruby, Effrem brought your papers to me. I took the liberty of refiling your original prenup. Don’t worry, I still have your copy. It’s in the safe of a good friend. Let’s say you’d have better luck getting into Fort Knox.”

I watch Ruby’s face as Gillian delivers the news. I can see surprise at first, then interest. Hopefully, she will forgive me. I’ll ask after Gillian and Dustin leave.

“I also spoke with a friend of mine who is a Fed. Did you know both Willem and Roger are being looked into for money laundering and wire fraud?”

Ruby looks like she’s been slapped in the face. “I had no idea. I thought they got their money from Roger’s great-grandfather.”

“They did. Nearly a billion dollars, but they spent a lot of it. Don’t worry. There’s enough left to give you the half you deserve. We’ll just liquidate their homes and businesses.”

“I, we, don’t have to do that.”

“If the state allowed me to take him for more, I would.” Gillian says. “You deserve that money. Take it and do some good with it.”

I see Ruby’s eyes light up. “I could do many good deeds with that kind of money. What do I need to do?”

“Nothing. Don’t sign anything, no matter how much pressure he puts on you. The moment he has contact with you, let me know. I’m filing a restraining order. I’ve

filed to get the case moved out of Indiana. The Buffets have too many contacts in their pockets there.”

“I guess Roger’s plan for the perfect Christmas just went up in flames.”

“That’s my girl.” I blurt out before I was thinking about it.

Gillian looks at me with a smirk and Ruby looks at me with a confused expression.

“I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself, Ruby. You spent twenty years with that jackass. You shouldn’t walk away empty-handed. In my opinion, you deserve that and more.”

“Thank you, Effrem.”

We spent the next hour going over information that Gillian found and questions she had for Ruby. I escort the ladies back to the living room. Dustin and Dalton are talking when we come back. I head over to them.

“Dustin, could I have a word with you.”

“Sure thing. Dalton, stop by the office. I’ll show you what I have. There’s a few not far from here.”

“Thanks, Dustin. I’ll see you early in the morning. I’m used to being up with the cattle.”

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“We open at seven.”

I gesture for Dustin to follow me outside. We have the fireplaces lit. I grab my jacket. Dustin does the same. I move to stand close to the fireplace.

“Are you and Ruby dating?”

“Shouldn’t you ask her that?”

“I’m asking you man to man. I don’t want to step on any toes.”

“Are you going to admit you’re attracted to her?”

A thousand responses ran through my mind. “Fuck!”

Dustin smiles. “You like her and it’s killing you because you think you’re betraying Evie.”

“Get the fuck out of my head.”

His smile widens. “Am I wrong?”

“No.”

“No, we’re not dating. I like her. She likes some stubborn jackass.”

“Who? Who does she like?”

“You. She’s been smitten since the moment you pulled her over. Believe me, if she was interested, I’d be all up in that. Instead, we’re becoming friends. And frankly, she’s a wonderful woman who I’m honored to call a friend. Don’t fuck this up, Effrem.”

“I don’t plan to, but I have no idea what I’m doing and I do feel guilty. I feel like I’m cheating on Evie. My God, she’s the only woman I’d ever kissed until Ruby.”

Dustin puts a hand on my shoulder. “I know I was only twenty-one when Evie died, but we all wanted a love like the two of you had. That’s gone and you can’t get it back, but you can have something else. Something different. Will it feel like it did with Evie? No, and it shouldn’t. Ruby’s a different person. Hell, you’re a different person.”

I took a few moments to process his words. I don’t disagree with anything he’s said so far.

“I can’t find fault with your words. Truth is the two of you are closer in age. Maybe I should just leave well enough alone.”

“Don’t you dare. Most of us never meet the love of their life. You had that and now this amazing woman has dropped into your lap. Don’t be that guy. Don’t thumb your nose at the universe when they’ve just delivered you a gift. Who knows where it will go, but take a chance.”

“I’ll take it all under consideration. Damn, it’s going to be a long two weeks.”

Dustin thumps me on the back. “Better you than me.”

Chapter 28

Ruby

I set my alarm for three-thirty this morning. When it goes off, I jump out of bed, take a quick shower, get dressed, and head to the kitchen. First thing I do is put the coffee on and start the dough for rolls. I'm making eggnog and gingerbread cinnamon rolls this morning.

“What smells good this early?”

I look up to see Dalton dressed for the day, striding into the kitchen.

“I have coffee ready and rolls coming out in ten minutes.”

“I'll wait for the protein, but coffee sounds amazing. I know where everything is," he says with a smile.

“I'm cooking breakfast meat next and I'll have egg casseroles as well. Is everyone else up as early as you?”

“Dad's already gone. He got called away on an emergency. Clyde is likely to sleep until around seven or eight. I have no idea what Jessi or the Kings are like. Are you always up this early?”

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“Yes, normally. Bakeries open early and the prep work takes a couple of hours.”

“I’m meeting Dustin in town in a few hours. Do you need anything from town?”

I shake my head. “I was going to town,too. I need to pick up a few things.”

“You can ride with me.”

“Some of the things are delicate. Why don’t we take my Suburban? It doesn’t matter who drives. I already have the second and third rows folded down.”

“Sounds like a good plan. Can I help you make breakfast?”

“If you’d like.”

We spent the next two hours talking. Dalton tells me stories about his Dad. A few about his mom, too. She sounds like an amazing person.

Out of the blue, he says. “Mom would’ve liked you. Dee is amazing, but you bring something back to the house we’ve been missing.”

Tears prick at the corner of my eyes. “I’m only helping your dad out, but it’s nice to be surrounded by family during the holidays.”

Even if they aren’t mine, I add silently.

“Consider yourself adopted. I haven’t seen Dad smile that much in years. The

snowball fight was epic. I'm glad you'll be around town. You're good for him."

"Thank you."

If only he knew how much his father would say those words to me. I knew coming here would be hard. Sleeping with him only solidified my feelings for him. Being here in his house with his family is making it grow. I'm going to get my heart broken, but I don't know how to stop this runaway train.

With breakfast finished and set-up, I hurry to get my things and meet Dalton in the foyer.

Jessi told me last night she's taking the King's out sightseeing. They're eating lunch out and won't be home until late, so a light supper is all that's needed. After grabbing my purse and coat, I head to the foyer. Dalton is waiting for me.

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting long."

"I only arrived a few moments ago. Why don't you drop me off, then I'll walk down to the bakery and help you load."

"You're a gem."

"I'll remind you of that come next Christmas. By then, I'm sure to have half a dozen or so faves."

I laugh. "I'll keep that in mind next Christmas."

The rest of the trip, we kept the banter light. He begged me to make fried pies for dessert tonight. I told him I have a new order put in and we'd pick it up from the McGraw's on the way back to the ranch.



Cece updated me on the festival idea. It's set for January twentieth. The first annual North Star Cherry Festival. We're having a cookoff and all things cherry will be sold in multiple shops on festival day.

I'm excited to be a part of the day. I'm planning on coming up with several new recipes, including the fried pies and cherry rolls. I drop Dalton off at the realty office and head to the bakery. I park the SUV by the back door for easier loading and head inside.

The workers won't be here for another hour. I head into the front first. The bakery walls already sport a fresh coat of cream paint. There's still a slight paint smell in the air. Satisfied with the progress, I head back into the kitchen to gather all my supplies.

I have to dig through a few boxes to find my candy molds. I add them to the growing pile of pans and assorted instruments I'll need for the next two weeks. I hadn't packed them before because I wanted to check out Effrem's kitchen. It's homey with professional grade appliances.

The back is mostly loaded when I remember the candy recipe book I want is upstairs. I hurry up the backstairs to the apartment, taking out my keys. I reach for the knob and notice the door isn't fully closed. I push it open with the heel of my hand.

I almost call out but think better of it. A noise comes from somewhere. I slowly peek my head around the door. I don't see anyone. whoever it is, either in the bathroom or closet. I eased the door closed and hurried down the stairs to the bakery.

I pull my phone to dial 9-1-1 when a hand grabs me.

"Give that to me."

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“No, I say.” Yanking at my phone and throwing an elbow.

It lands with a thud.

“You’ll pay for that bitch.”

I feel a blow land to the side of my head. I scream out and run for the door. He grabs me around the waist. I dig my nails into his hands. He releases me, only to hit me again. My head is ringing, but I’m not giving up.

“Let her go.” I hear Dalton’s voice.

I bring my foot down on his instep. He shoves me away. I fall into one of the metal counters, hitting my head.

### Chapter 29

Ruby

Dalton pulls to a stop in front of the ranch house and comes to help me out.

“Lean on me. Let’s get you inside.”

By the time I’d come too, I was in the town’s small emergency facility. The man who attacked me had gotten away. Dalton was more concerned with me since I hit my head and was knocked unconscious.

We enter the foyer.

“Ruby, are you alright.” I hear Jessi ask.

“She was attacked earlier today.”

“Oh dear. Let’s get you some hot tea and get you into bed,” Jessi says.

I let her guide me to the guest bedroom. She leaves me to get tea and I undress, sliding on an oversized tee. Jessi comes back a few minutes later with a cup of tea.

“It’s peppermint. If you feel like it later, you can take a long soak in dad’s tub.”

“Thank you, Jessi. I may do that after I take a nap.”

“Dalton and Clyde are unloading the SUV.

“Thank you.”

“I should stay home and look after you.”

I shake my head. “I’m just a little bruised. I’ll be good as new with some rest.”

Jessi left, reluctantly. I take a few sips of the tea before crawling under the covers.

I cannot believe this day. Someone broke into my home and for what I don’t have anything. Then they assaulted me. I would’ve been in real trouble if Dalton hadn’t shown up. I shudder to think what would’ve happened. As I have no clue what the man wanted. It’s too bad he got away.

Dalton called the police as soon as he checked me out. Deputy Boyd took our

statement and escorted us down to the emergency room. Thank God our town has one. Not that my injury is life threatening but with all the ranches and farms around here, not to mention traffic accidents, it's a blessing. Listen to me thinking like Wolf Creek is my home and has been forever.

It hits me then. For the first time, in maybe ever, I feel home. This is home. This small town with its beautiful people. It reminds me of a song a country music caught flack for. Small towns take care of one another. It doesn't matter your skin color. If you're in need there's a town behind you.

In the short while I've been here the residents of Wolf Creek have welcomed me and made me part of them. It's like a big family.

I tried to relax into the pillows and closed my eyes. It felt like the weight of the world rested on my shoulders and now some random man is after me or something I have. I don't understand. I don't have money. My jewelry is locked in a bank in downtown Indianapolis. Giving up I head to Effrem's room and start the water in his enormous tub.

Effrem

What a cluster fuck of a day. First I get called out of town on an emergency. The sheriff two towns over was shot this morning, and his house set on fire. What the actual fuck. Who shoots a small town sheriff and sets his house on fire.

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By the time I arrived the sheriff was in surgery. His house, a total loss. Luckily, his wife, kids, and dogs all got out safely.

I immediately pull everyone we can off the street. Eyewitnesses put a local trouble maker at the scene. I issued an APB and started a man hunt.

The deputy sheriff is in Florida for the holidays with his sick mother and the other deputies all have less than two years on the force. Alan's best guys all retired over the last couple of years. He's in the process of recruiting. What an absolute clusterfuck.

Things like this remind me I need to make sure my contingency plan is effective. With Buck out if something happened to me I have Boyd and Jeffries. Both have five years on the force. Not the veterans Buck and I are but far from the wet behind the ears Dingleberry. That kid's never going to make it past his rookie year.

I hope like hell that Wilder will consider joining the force. He may never ride bulls or broncs again but he can still take down a criminal. He's proven that by wiping the floor with all the assholes that came at him over the last month.

Next we get the suspect but not before he manages to wound a deputy and two civilians. I had to put a bullet in him, but it's not fatal. No, if he shot the sheriff he deserves to spend decades behind bars. Add three more counts of attempted murder and he'll never see the light of day.

On the way home I ran into construction then got a flat tire. After changing it, I'm filthy and exhausted. All I want is some food and a hot shower. I don't care which order.

Jessi told me she's taking the King's sight seeing today. They're eating lunch out and will be home late. That'll give me time to go take flowers to Evie's grave. Clyde is tagging along with his sister and Dalton is meeting with Dustin today.

I hope my boy finds a property nearby. With Clyde possibly wanting to move colleges and Jessi coming home after graduation all my kids are coming back to the roost. My heart couldn't be more full or more proud. Evie would be so proud of our kids.

I take my boots off by the back door and hang my hat and coat on a peg. I parked in the garage. Ruby's SUV is parked outfront. Both the truck and the Yukon are gone. I wash my hands in the big farm sink before heading into the kitchen. I'm surprised Ruby's not here. It's only been a day but I'm used to her being here.

With the kitchen empty and my stomach rumbling I search for leftovers. I pile a plate high with breakfast casserole, ham, sausage and bacon. The cinnamon rolls smell delicious, but I'm not much for sweets. The fried cherry pies with honey are my weakness.

After heating everything I sit at the island and eat it while enjoying a cup of coffee. Oh this is good. The casserole has eggs, potatoes, onions, peppers, cheese, and a hint of hot peppers. I wonder if she used the cheddar jack with cayenne peppers.

When I'm finished I wash my plate, mug, and utensils putting them in the drain to dry. After wiping down the counters, I head to my room. I wonder if Ruby is down at the stables? I'll find her as soon as I'm finished with my shower. Once I'm certain she's fine, I'll saddle Duke and head to Evie's grave.

I have a lot of things I need to work through and she's my best sounding board.

I don't know if I'm more overwhelmed over my own feelings for Ruby, or the fact

my family seems to think we belong together. Hell they don't even know we hooked up. I winced at the thought of the words. She deserves so much better than a hook-up or one night stand.

I step into the bathroom and strip out of my clothes, tossing them in the hamper before turning to the shower.

## Chapter 30

Effrem

My eyes widen as I take in a wet and very naked Ruby in my bathtub. Up to her chin in bubbles. A quick pang hits my heart when I realize the bubble bath is likely Evie's. I never threw it away. I cleaned out the rest of her belongings a few months after she passed. I wanted to give myself and my family time to grief and deal with the loss before I started getting rid of Evie's belongings.

I zero in on her face and notice something awry. Forgetting I'm buck naked I stroll to the side of the tub and gently take her face in my hand. She had a black eye and a huge knot on the side of her head. I can see it pushing up through her hair.

"Baby, what happened?" I sit on the edge of the tub.

Her eyes are wide.

"Um, Effrem."

"Yes, Ruby."

"You're naked."

“So are you.”

“I’m in the tub.”

“I was going to take a shower. I didn’t know you were in here but none of that is important. Tell me who did this to you darling and do my deputies have him locked up?”

She gingerly shakes her head. “No, I’m afraid not. I don’t know who it was. Someone was in my apartment. They didn’t see me. At least I thought they didn’t. I went to the bakery to call 9-1-1 and he grabbed me. We struggled and he hit me. We struggled some more. Dalton arrived but the man pushed me and I hit my head and got knocked out. Dalton stayed with me until Deputy Boyd arrived. Then they took me to the ER.”

“Is anything broken?”



“No.”

“Where’s Dalton?”

“He’s with the sketch artist at the office. They’re going to put an APB out on the man when he’s done.

“That’s my boy.” I say with a nod.

It hits me like a ton of bricks, I could have lost her again today. That’s twice. This woman is going to turn the rest of my black hair gray.

“I don’t know if I should kiss you or spank you for getting into trouble again.”

“Kiss me now. Spank me later.”

I don’t need any further encouragement. I step into the tub, put her on my lap and kiss her until I can’t tell where I stop and she begins. I kiss her like I want to drink her soul. I feel something I’ve never felt before. I can’t put a name to it, but it’s there. It’s alive and thriving.

When the kiss breaks apart my hard cock is knocking on the door of her soaked entrance. Soaked from more than the water. Her nipples are pretty pink peaks. Her face is flushed and her breathing is ragged.

“Efrem. I can’t not if you’re going to disappear again.”

“I won’t disappear again but I need to take things slow. I’ve only ever dated one woman my entire life. Until I met you, I never wanted to date another.”

“We’ll take it as slow as you need. Just don’t ghost me.”

“I won’t ghost you.”

I kiss her lips again before kissing down her throat. I bite at the pulse of her neck, sucking the flesh into my mouth. After her second close call with danger I feel the need to mark her. She moans and sinks her nails into the flesh of my shoulder. I pick her up.

“Straddle me.”

She does.

“Hold my cock baby.”

She reaches around and holds my cock. I line it up with her entrance and gently impale her on the length of my cock. I move so she can get her legs further around me. Her eyes are round.

“Spitfire, are you alright.”

“This feels so amazing I’m afraid to move. It feels so incredible and you’re so deep. Deeper than anyone else.”

I chuckle and thrust my hips up. She gasps and grabs hold of my shoulders.

“Ride my cock, spitfire. Ride me like you mean it.” I growl taking her lips again in a possessive kiss.

I own her mouth. I own her body. She's going to give me every inch of it. Even if she doesn't realize it yet.

## Chapter 31

Ruby

My day from hell is turning into a day of incredible bliss. I can't begin to describe the intense pleasure I feel in this position. Roger would never try it. He said I was too heavy and I'd hurt him. He was mister missionary. Effrem rolls his hips and shoots me through the ozone.

I gasp and grasp his shoulders. When he tells me to ride him, that's what I do. I start out slow. The tub is slippery and water isn't the best friction but I'm so wet from being turned on it doesn't matter. As I move up and down his length, a new sensation of pleasure wash over my body.

Effrem's hands, lips and teeth are everywhere. I know he's leaving marks all over my body and I don't care. They're marks showing I'm alive, I'm desired and maybe one day I'll be loved, too.

I speed up and get lost in all that sensations that are making love to Effrem Reeves. As my pleasure intensifies I feel myself getting closer to going over the edge. I close my eyes and revel in the passion. He rolls his hips hitting that magic spot inside me and at the same time he pinches my clit.

"Effrem!" I cry out and moisture gushes from me.

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I had to look that up after it happened the first time. He's making me squirt. I thought that was for books and porn. It's a real thing. A really real thing and oh my god that felt amazing.

"Spitfire, did you squirt all over me again?"

"Yes. I've never done it before you."

"Squirt?"

"Squirt or have an orgasm." I pant as I continue to ride his cock.

Aftershocks hit my body with each stroke. If he didn't have a firm hold of me, I would've fallen into the water.

"You're kidding right?" He asks in between kisses

He's still rock hard inside me and my body is building for another orgasm. My legs and inside feel like jelly and I want more.

"No." I pant digging my nails into his shoulders as he thrusts up into me.

I met his gaze. He has the biggest smile on his face.

"I'll have to make up for all the orgasms you missed out on, spitfire."

"Oh yes!" I cry out as I tip over the edge again.

This time my toes curl and my eyes roll back in my head. My whole body shakes as I convulse around him. Effrem cries out in surprise and cums deep inside me. I can feel his seed splash against the walls of my womb. It's the most incredible thing.

We're both breathing ragged, sweat beads on his forehead. He lowers it so our heads are touching as the orgasms subside.

"That's the most incredible thing I've ever experienced," I say.

Closing my eyes as he kisses me. I silently add I love you.

Effrem

"Let's get you out of the tub and into bed for a nap."

She nods her head in agreement. I help her up before getting up and out of the tub first. I grab a towel she has nearby and wrap it around her.

"We seem to have a thing for the bathroom."

She laughs. "Last time things didn't start there."

"That's true."

I wrap the towel around my waist and follow her as she walks out of my room and into the guestroom. I want to offer her my bed, but before I do that I need to talk to Evie. It's not our bed. I gave that to Dalton when he moved out. I bought him a new box spring and mattress and gave him the bedroom set. It was a wedding present from Evie's parents.

I also want to talk to the kids after I talk to Evie. I get Ruby tucked into bed. Kissing

her lips softly before I head to my room to get dressed. After getting dressed I head to the greenhouse and gather a bouquet for Evie. Tying it with the twine I had in my pocket I carry it to the barn.

I can't believe we're still having a cold snap. Cold weather with snow for this long is a rarity in Oklahoma. At least we're not in Florida or some other place people become idiots the moment a flake falls. I have Duke saddle in no time with the flowers tied to the saddle, I mount up and head to the ridge.

One day I'll bring Ruby up here and introduce them. I'm thankful she agreed to take things slow. I promised I wouldn't ghost her again and I meant it. I'm a grown man. That was a childish, cowardly thing to do. I'm thankful, she's giving me a second chance. I can't help but compare the two women. Not in a bad way where I find one lacking something the other possesses. More in a way where I can admire the strength in both of them. Evie's was a quiet, gentle strength. Something I had to learn to nurture and not crush. I'll take the same care with Ruby, but she has a fire, Evie didn't.

The afternoon air is crisp. The sun is shining. I can hear birds calling on the ride through the pasture to the tree line. I feel light. Lighter than I have in a while. It's like the Universe is conspiring to bring new blessings into my life.

The kids moving back, Ruby moving into town and into my life. Not that I'm the only one excited for Ruby to be in Wolf Creek. The town is excited to have a bakery again, but it's more than that. They love her personality. She's made deliveries of free baked goods to nearly every shop downtown and some that aren't even close to her bakery.

Someone from the business stopped by to tell her hello and give them a run down of their favorites. I chuckle. Ruby said she had quite the collection of favorites. She had plenty of things to make in the bakery that everyone would love for the foreseeable

future.

## Chapter 32

Effrem

Lost in thought I arrive at the graveside before I realize it. I tied Duke off and hopped down. Retrieving the flowers from the saddle I trudge through the snow to her grave. I dust off the snow and put the flowers in the permanent vase I had added.

I remove my hat and kneel down by her stone. Removing my gloves I trace the letters of her name etched in the stone.

“I don’t even know where to begin, Evie.”

I feel her then. Her presence. It’s not the first time I’ve felt her here. As if she’s standing beside me with her hand on my shoulder listening to every word I say.

“Love, I don’t know how to say this, but I’ve met someone.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “The kids don’t even know I’m attracted to her and they already like her. She’s brought back an energy to the house we’ve been missing since you left us.

“The kids are coming back home baby and I’m fairly certain Kai is working up the courage to ask for my permission to marry our little girl. Can you believe she’s twenty-five?”

I don’t know how long I talk to Evie. At some point I become aware of two riders approaching the area. I look to see Dalton with Kai, who doesn’t look completely terrified, riding Buttermilk.



They stop several yards away. Dalton dismounts first tying his horse not far from Duke. Kai gets off but stays back while Dalton walks to the grave. He takes off his hat.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

“Hello, son. I needed to talk to your mother.”

“Did she talk back?”

“Not, yet, but she will. She always does. What brings you up here?”

“Kai wants to talk to you. I figured you’d be here when Duke wasn’t in the stall.”

“It’s where I do my best thinking.”

“It’s always peaceful up here. I’ll send Kai over if you’re done.”

I nod my head and watch Dalton walk away. I know all the kids visit here from time to time. It’s always been a place of peace for me, I didn’t know Dalton felt the same way.

Kai crosses the distance, shoulders back, head held high. I can tell he’s a little nervous when he gets closer.

“Mr. Reeves.”

“You can call me, Effrem.”

“Effrem, I’d like your permission to ask Jessi to marry me.”

“You think you’re ready for that step son?”

“We can have a long engagement. Wait until after school is finished before we get married.”

“You have one more year to go.”

“With the way my mother plans weddings it’ll take her an entire year.”

“I thought you were an only child.”

“I am but she has sisters and all her sisters have daughters. She’s the wedding planner of the family.”

“You have my permission, young man.”

He visibly relaxes. “Thank you, sir.”

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“How did you manage to duck out of the day’s festivities?”

“Clyde is covering for me. I have to get back. I left them at Calico Gypsies.”

“Gypsy is good but you best hurry.”

He nods his head and hurries back to Buttermilk. Dalton joins his soon to be brother in law. I watch as they disappear into the trees. Moments later I hear the flap of wings and look to see a cardinal resting on Evie’s headstone.

“Thank you, for your blessing, my love.”

With my query answered I untie Duke, mount up, and head back to the barn.

??

I sent Clyde a text earlier to pick up pizza from Mama Bear’s. I called in the order and paid for it. Ruby is still sleeping and I don’t want her to exert herself making even a light dinner for ten people.

By the time she wakes up everyone is back home and we’re dishing out pizza.

“How are you feeling?” I ask as soon as she wanders into the kitchen.

“Other than a killer headache, not bad.”

“Oh, Ruby, your eye.”

“It’ll heal. In the meantime take pics of my good side.” Ruby replies with a smile.

“Tomorrow and Christmas I’ll help you put cover up on it.”

“I’d like that. We’ll have to arrange my hair to hide the bump too.”

Jessi crosses the room and envelopes Ruby in a hug.

“You poor dear.”

“Thanks to Dalton, I’m fine.”

“Big bro is a hero.” Jessi says.

“I don’t know about that the guy got away. They have an APB out on him.” Dalton adds.

“We’re lucky to have a sketch artist in a town this small. Most of the surrounding cities don’t have one,” I say.

“Lucky for us she’s in love with your deputy,” Dalton says.

“Yep,”

“Who’s ready for pizza?” Clyde asks, carrying in half a dozen boxes.

“Me! I’m starving,” Ruby says.

I went over to Ruby and guided her to the seat beside me. Jessi brought in a stack of paper plates, and napkins. While Maya carried a pitcher of sangria and glasses on a tray. Kai came in with cold bottles of soda.

I grabbed two cokes, took my keys out of my pocket and opened them. I keep soda in stock in glass bottles which are recycled. The Coke is from Mexico and has real sugar in it. I'm not a high-fructose corn syrup fan and avoid it where I can.

“What do you like on your pizza?”

“I like all kinds. Cheese, cheese with mushrooms, and supreme with olives are my favorite.”

I chuckle. “I'll keep that in mind. We can make pizza's next time.”

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“I want to use that pizza oven.” Ruby says.

I smile. “I thought you might. Maybe on New Year's Eve we can have pizza night.”

Nods of agreement went along the table.

“We can have a pizza contest.” Clyde says. “See who makes the best pizza.”

“Who's going to judge?”

“You, Ruby and Maya. I want to beat Xavier. He's been bragging about his kitchen skills.”

“Hey, it's not bragging. If it's a fact,” Xavier retorts.

“We'll see X.” Clyde says.

I sit and watch my family banter back and forth with old and new members alike. Ruby joins in a little but I can tell she's not feeling great.

“Let's get you tucked in.”

When she nods her head. I pull back her chair and pick her up. She's either too tired or too shocked to protest. When she lays her head against my shoulder, I know it's because she's in a lot of pain.

I carry her to my room. With her eyes closed she doesn't notice. I set her on the bed

before I undress her. And tuck her in.

## Chapter 33

Ruby

I wake up with a start. Nausea slams into me with a vengeance. I throw back the covers and race for the bathroom. It's not until I'm bent over the porcelain goddess with someone holding my hair, I realize I'm in Effrem's room.

Thankfully, I'd slept through the night and digested all that delicious pizza. I still threw up bile several times before I felt safe enough to lean back from the bowl. He helped me from the floor to the lip of the tub.

"I'll be right back, baby."

I hold on to the side of the tub. I feel a thousand percent better. Effrem comes back with a cool washcloth for my neck and a warm one for my face.

"Thank you."

"I'm going to get you settled on the call Doc Nash. He'll come out to the ranch and check you out."

I nod my head and let him help me to the sink. He pulls out a fresh toothbrush, takes it out of the wrapper and hands it to me. I smiled when I looked at the old-fashioned toothbrush. My guess, it's been in the drawer a very long time.

He gets me settled then grabs his phone and makes a call.

"Doc's on his way. I'm headed downstairs to make you some peppermint tea. Evie

swore by it when any of us had an upset stomach.”

“Thank you. Can I have a little honey in it.”

“Of course. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Here I sit propped up in Effrem’s bed with a houseful of his kids. I hope they don’t think less of me. I wonder what made him bring me here instead of to the guest room. He was attentive at dinner last night. Touching my hand, getting me slices of pizza and soda. Little touches to my arm or leg when he sat down. All of it in front of the guests. If anyone noticed they didn’t say anything.

Not that we’re hiding anything, but we are taking it slow. You usually don’t meet the family until the relationship is serious. Then again, nothing about this relationship is serious and I’m meeting the kids to help him out.

They’re great kids too. He’s done a wonderful job of raising them the last sixteen years without Evie by his side. Jessi is warm and welcoming. Clyde is easy to laugh and a little unsure of himself. Expected at the age of nineteen. And, Dalton, who’s closer to my age than his father, is brave and full of personality. He’s got a casual ease about him whereas Effrem has an air of intensity that surrounds him.

Maya and Xavier enter the bedroom coming to my side.

“Effrem said you’re not feeling well, dear. You tell us what you have planned for the day and we’ll take care of it.”



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“Besides cooking meals. I thought we’d have a candy and cookie making party. I got all the supplies yesterday but I haven’t had time to make the fondant for your cherries.”

“You were going to make my favorite candy?” Maya says, her hand over her heart.

“I heard you tell Jessi how much you loved them. I have the molds.”

“If you can walk me through making the fondant. Oh hell who am I kidding. Walk me through the whole thing. I’ll be your hands.”

I laugh. “I’m not an invalid just a little green around the gills.”

“After you got knocked around yesterday Maya and I were going to offer to take over cooking for the day, anyway.” Xavier offers. “Plus I need to show Clyde my cooking skills.

I laugh. “I’ll leave the food in your capable hands.”

Xavier lights up. “Dutch babies for breakfast.”

“Yum.”

“We’ll see you in a little while,” Maya says.

The King’s leave and shortly afterward Effrem returns with a tray carrying a mug of tea and a plate with saltines on it.

“Thank you.”

I manage to eat a few crackers and drink half the mug of tea before Doctor Nash showed up. He was a handsome man over six feet tall with thick curly hair, mischievous green eyes and mustache that would make a seventies porn star envious. I'd see he was in his mid-forties, fit, and had a smile that put me at ease.

“You must be, Ruby. I'm Cyrus Nash. You can call me Cy. All my friends do. Since you're the new bakery owner we're going to be good friends. A love hate relationship. I'll love your baked goods and hate the extra workout.”

I laugh.

“Effrem says you got quite the nasty bump on your head yesterday and you threw up this morning. Is that right?”

“Yes, that's right. I was assaulted yesterday and then pushed. I fell and hit my head against the metal counter.”

He holds up a doctor's bag. An honest to goodness doctor's bag like Doc Baker on Little House on the Prairie.

“Let's check you and see if we can get you fixed up without having to take you somewhere for testing.”

He checks all my vitals, shines a light in my eyes and checks the bump on my head. He also, gently, reexamines my eye.

“Before we move on let's get all the routine questions out of the way.”

“Is it possible you're pregnant?”

“Not possible.”

“When’s the last time you had intercourse?”

I turn bright red. “Umm yesterday.”

“Before that?”

“About three weeks ago. Have you missed your period since then?”

“I did miss my last period but I’m sterile. I can't have kids.”

“Humor me and pee on this little stick anyway," he says pulling a test kit from the bag.

“I’ll draw blood if need be but let’s start here. Do you need help getting to the bathroom?”

“No, I can. Thanks.”

Of all the ridiculous things, but he’s the doctor. I take the drugstore pregnancy test and head back to the bathroom. After peeing on the stick I set it on top of the box on the counter and wash my hands. Sure of what the results will be I leave it there and head back into the bathroom.

“It’s on the counter on top of the box.”

Doctor Nash nods his head and heads into the bathroom. I chew on my fingernails waiting. Disappointment sits like a lead balloon in my stomach. I don’t know why. I know I can’t have children. I’ve known for more than a decade.

The doctor comes back into the room. A smile on his face.

“Ruby, who told you, you couldn’t have kids?”

“A doctor about thirteen years ago.”

“Did they say you had a small chance?”

I shake my head. Unsure of why we’re having this conversation.

“They said I was sterile with zero percent chance of ever conceiving.”

“The doctor either needs his medical licenses revoked or he lied to you. You’re pregnant. I’ll draw blood to make sure. It’ll take a few days to get the results since

it's the holidays. In the meantime no alcohol and I'll write you a script for prenatal vitamins."

I listened to him in shock. I'm pregnant? Is that really possible?

## Chapter 34

Effrem

Christmas morning I'm up before everyone. Ruby's been quiet the last couple of days but I did convince her to stay in my room so I can keep an eye on her. The kids are taking things in strides. Not one of them has said a word about Ruby sleeping in my room.

The situation makes it seem like our relationship is moving forward at warp speed, but I don't want her far away from me. She threw up twice more yesterday. Doc Nash says she'll be fine. He drew some blood work but said he doesn't think she has a concussion.

Ruby's been through a lot in a short amount of time. I need to remember that life is headed at her at a hundred miles an hour right now. So far we haven't heard a word from her ex. I'm surprised the divorce was due to be final a few hours ago. She refused to sign the final papers that would make it happen. Gillian is waiting to hear from the courts in Indiana. Not surprised they haven't responded since it's the holidays. The divorce will likely drag out into January if not February.

After putting on the coffee pot I check in with Boyd and Jeffries. They're splitting the day's shift. It's usually pretty quiet on Christmas. I haven't had to arrest anyone in a decade. I'm hoping the trend continues.

Last night I told Ruby, I'd handle Christmas breakfast. It's a tradition. I make sausage

gravy, from scratch biscuits, fried potatoes, and scrambled eggs.

My parents, if I know my dad, will arrive around five. My mom swears it'll be half past nine. My dad is up the same time I am every morning, three. The kids wouldn't be up until later. I'm shooting for breakfast around nine. Evie's parents should be here no later than ten.

There's been no sign of the man that broke into Ruby's apartment. I drove Ruby to town yesterday after the cookie and candy making. The place was ransacked but she said nothing was taken. It took less than an hour for us to put things back to rights. Afterwards we came home to enjoy a meal cooked by Xavier and she turned in early.

I plug in the Christmas tree and admire the lights while enjoying my first cup of coffee for the day. It's amazing what a difference a few weeks makes. My world's been turned on its ear and I couldn't be happier.

"Merry Christmas, Effrem."

I look up to see Ruby. She's already dressed in jeans and a soft looking blue sweater. Her feet bear she pads across the floor.

"Want some coffee?"

She smiles and shakes her head.

"Hot chocolate."

I follow her in the kitchen as she makes hot chocolate using melting chocolate, milk and cream. By the time the hot chocolate is ready and there's a knock at the door.

"I'll get it," Clyde says.

“I’ll get extra mugs,” Jessi adds.

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Kai and his parents joined us as my parents and Evie's parents arrived. After the introductions we gather in the great room with a drink of choice and pass out presents.

"Kai , you go first."

Kai gets a small box from under the tree and hands it to Jessi. She unwraps it. Inside is a clue. The clue leads her to the hallway. Another box and another clue. Four clues later she's been all over the house and is back with a big box that was under the tree. She opens it to find a pair of my old muck boots. She tosses them out and starts to dig through the box when something catches her eye. There's another small box inside the boots.

She rips open the paper and opens it to find a small velvet box inside. She raises her hand to her mouth. I can see tears gathering in the corners. Kai takes the velvet box from her hand and gets down on one knee.

"Jessi from the moment I met you, you've invaded my thoughts. You're the first thing I think of when I wake up and the last thing I think of when I go to bed. I want to spend the rest of my life waking up beside you. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife."

"Yes," she gasps. "Yes, I'll marry you."

Everyone cheers. The grandmas immediately demand to see the ring. The next few minutes are a whirlwind of congratulations.



My phone rings before we can pass out any more gifts. It's my work phone.

"Sheriff, this is Boyd. The bakery's on fire."

## Chapter 35

Ruby

What a beautiful proposal. Tears prick at the corner of my eyes as I watch the happy couple. I'm thrilled for them. I decide as soon as we're done with presents, I'll offer to make their wedding cake. I haven't made one for ages. I love making wedding cakes.

When I was married to Roger, I made wedding cakes for my family and their friends. I did it for the cost of the ingredients to help people save money. The labor was my gift to them. I would've given the entire cake, but Roger refused to pay for the ingredients. When I paid for them out of my allowance, he threw a fit.

He said it was beneath a Buffet to bake cakes for poor people. I should have asked if it would be alright if I baked cakes for rich people. But I never did. Instead, I asked the bride, groom, or family to pay for the ingredients and I made them beautiful cakes. I have photos of all of them.

After the congratulations, Effrem's phone rings. I can't tell what's being said on the other end of the line, but it's not good. Effrem tensed beside me.

"We'll be right there."

He hangs up the phone. A serious look on his face.

"Ruby, we have to go. Your bakery is on fire."

“Oh, God, no.” I say jumping to my feet.

Effrem has my hand. We’re racing out to his truck. The bakery had a complete inspection. It can’t be wiring. I don’t understand. How could this be happening? It’s not until we’re blasting down the drive with the lights and sirens on that I realize Xavier and Dalton were with us.

Effrem takes one of my hands into his much larger one.

“We’ll get through this, no matter how bad it is.”

“Do you have insurance?” Xavier asks.

I nod my head numbly. “Yes, I have a good policy. I’m covered for everything but setting it on fire myself. We all know that didn’t happen.”

Effrem squeezes my hand. “I assume all you’re up to date on inspections.

“All fresh and certified last week.”

“When’s the last time you were at the bakery?” Xavier asks.

I’m thankful for the questions. They’re keeping me from having a panic attack.

“Two days ago when I was attacked. I haven’t used the equipment in several days. I know everything was off.”

“I did a walk through before I left, Ruby. Everything was off. I locked up after the police were finished.”

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:09 pm*

Effrem pulled the truck to a stop near the front of the bakery. Fire trucks were spraying water on the fire which was licking out the windows of the apartment. As soon as we pulled to a stop we hurried out. One of the firemen spots Effrem and heads toward us.

“Reeves,” the man says.

“Nash. This is Ruby, the bakery’s owner. Ruby, this is Fire Chief Nash.”

“Ma’am,” he says, tipping his helmet before turning his attention back to Effrem.

“Fire started upstairs. We’ve contained most of the damage to the top floor but I’m afraid that everything in the apartment is a total loss.”

Life chose that moment to catch up to me. Darkness swam in my vision before claiming me.

Effrem

“Ruby.”

I call out her name and catch her before she hits the ground.

“Cy is on duty at the ER.”

“I’ll drive,” Dakota says.

I carry her to the truck. Dalton opens the door for me. I settle us in. He closes the door behind us and hurries to the driver's door. My son impresses me, maneuvering the vehicle like a pro. He pulls to a stop and emergency personnel come rushing out, Cyrus among them.

They get her on the gurney and wheel her inside. I follow them inside.

“What happened?” Cyrus asks. Taking her vitals.

“She passed out. We were outside the bakery with your brother.”

“Andy?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a total loss?”

“Just the apartment. I don’t know how much damage the bakery sustained.”

“Andy will check in as soon as the fire is contained enough for him to access the damage.”

He turns to the nurses. “Let’s get her into a room and start IV fluids. Draw some blood and run a full panel on it. Have the labs put a rush on it.”

I watch as the nurses move to follow Nash’s orders. He stops me as they wheel her out.

“It’s likely exhaustion, and dehydration. She’s been through a lot the last few days.”

“She has indeed. Add the soon to be nasty divorce on top of that. It’s a wonder she’s

still standing at all.”

I hold Ruby’s hand for the next couple of hours while she sleeps and we wait for tests. I’ve never been a fan of hurry up and wait. As I look at her sleeping form I realize she’s worked her way into my heart. I don’t know that I’m in love yet, but I’m headed in that direction.

## Chapter 36

Ruby

New Year’s Eve

The last week has flown by. When I’m not on bed rest Effrem’s let me bake and help cook for the family. Xavier took over most of the cooking and the entire family pitched in.

Chief Nash ruled the fire an arson. There’s an investigation, until it’s done I can’t get the insurance money to fix the smoke and water damage the bakery sustained. My apartment is a total loss as are all my things. Only what I have with me was spared. Thankfully the fire was contained to the apartment.

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:09 pm*

Blood tests confirmed that I am pregnant. Only a few weeks along. I plan on telling Effrem soon. I needed a few days to process everything. I'm telling him today before we meet with Gillian. She's coming over to update me on the case and have dinner with us.

After walking through the house and not finding Effrem I dress in warm clothes and head to the barn. I find him in one of the stalls grooming a big dappled appaloosa. He smiles when he sees me.

"Come on in and meet Duke."

I enter the stall. The big gelding turns his attention to me. I offer my hand and let him come to me. He smells my hand for a few seconds before pushing his nose against the palm of my hand.

I pet up his face. He lowers his head and I scratch his ears.

"What a good boy."

"His name is Duke."

"Nice to meet you, Duke."

The gelding nods his head like he's responding to me. Effrem chuckles.

"He likes you."

“I like him. He’s friendly. Do you think we could talk?”

“Of course. Let me put away the grooming tools.”

I follow him out of the stall and into the tack room.

“It’s still pretty cold out there. Do you want to walk or sit in the office?”

“I’d like to take a walk.”

“I know just the place.”

Effrem threads his gloved fingers through my gloved ones and leads us out of the barn. We go around the barn to a small trail. The trail leads through a wooded area. The woods open up to a field and beyond that an enormous pond.

Ice covers the top of the pond, but I doubt it’s like back home and thick enough to skate on. Fat flakes fall from the sky catching on our nose and eyelashes.

“I thought it didn’t snow in Oklahoma.”

He laughs. “It doesn’t, normally. Maybe it’s Oklahoma’s way of welcoming you home.”

“It does feel more like home than I thought it would. A large part of that is thanks to you and your family. I thought I was the one helping you out, but you helped me out. You showed me something I’ve been missing out on my whole life, family.”

He turns me around, pulls me into his arms and gives me a passionate kiss. Any coldness I felt is swept away in the warmth of his embrace.

“You keep kissing me like that and I’ll forget what I have to say.”

He gives me a cheeky grin before kissing me senseless again.

“What did you have to say?”

“Umm. Oh hell. Give me a minute.”

He wraps his arms around me and tucks my head under his chin.

“Take your time.”

The closeness isn’t helping. I need to tell him we’re having a baby. Instead I’m thinking of the quickest way I can get someplace to get his clothes off. Focus Ruby.

“We didn’t use protection. I thought I couldn’t have kids. I’ve thought for years that I’m sterile. I didn’t say anything because I thought it was impossible. I know you’re clean and I haven’t had sex with Roger in years. I know I’m clean. But who knew it would take twice or actually once. It was the first time that did it.



## Page 62

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“Cy mentioned it the day I was attacked but I thought no way and wanted to wait for a blood test. Christmas day when the bakery was set on fire and I fainted. They took blood and ran all kinds of tests. One test was to verify what Cyrus knew two days earlier.”

### Chapter 37

Effrem

She's cute when she's nervous but I have no idea what she's rambling about. I caught the fact that we had sex twice and I didn't use a condom either time. I assume she's on birth control but never thought to ask. Then again I should've asked. What's that they say about assuming.

I turn her around and cup her face with my hands.

“Spitfire, what are you trying to say?”

“I'm pregnant.”

What?! Okay, that caught me completely off guard. My shock turns into joy. I grab her to me and whirl her around placing another kiss on her lips.

“I'm going to be a dad. At my age.”

I start to chuckle. She looks at me with big eyes.

“You’re not mad?”

“Shocked, surprised, yes. Mad, no. You’ll be an amazing mom. Can we tell the kids?”

She nods her head. I can see she looks a little shocked.

“Yes, of course. Tonight, at or after dinner?”

“Perfect. Let’s get you back and get you warm. Gillian will be here soon. Did you ever get a second opinion?”

She shakes her head. “No. Roger took me to the best fertility specialist. When you start at the top, where do you go?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

??

Gillian arrived shortly after lunch. We head into my office where we tell Gilly the news. Then Ruby tells her about the tests and what the doctor said.

“Likely another nail in his coffin. I know who to contact to get the information we need. Has he tried to contact you?”

Ruby shakes her head. “I haven’t. Not by phone or email.”

“The break-in and fire. Do you think either of those things is connected to Roger?”

“You do. Don’t you?” I ask.

“Yes.” Gillian responds. “On the other hand, congratulations. This man makes beautiful babies.”

I saw tears run down Ruby’s cheeks but she laughs at Gillian’s comment.

“He does that. I’ve seen the adult version and the pictures on the walls.”

“I can get out the photo albums. If you’d like to see more.” I offer.

“I’d love that,” Ruby replies.”

“Gilli, what have your friends found out?”

“Enough to hang Roger and his father. They’re freezing all their assets as we speak. The next time either try to access their banks or use a credit card it’ll be denied.”

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“I’d love to be a fly on the wall when that happens. I don’t know who will have the bigger cow Roger or his father. Possibly his mother. She loves to spend. I swear she spends forty plus hours a week on the shopping channels. Not to mention the in person and online shopping sprees she does regularly.” Ruby says.

“How did you survive in that family for that long?”

“First, it was love. I loved Roger, or at least what I thought love was. Then it was determination. I wanted to get out of the marriage with something more than the clothes on my back. I had a feeling Roger would try something sneaky. Money is his first love. It only took me a decade to realize it.”

“The important thing is you figured it out and got out,” Gillian says.”

A knock sounds on the door.

“Come in.”

Jessi pops her head in the door.

“Dinner’s ready if you are.”

“We’ll be right there, pumpkin.”

Jessi leaves, and I look at Gillian.

“Do you have anything else?”

She smiles. "An appetite. Feed me."

Both sets of grandparents, Gillian and Dustin, came tonight. We're a full house. Xavier made surf and turf for dinner. We moved the pizza contest until lunch tomorrow. Halfway through dinner, I notice Ruby turning pale.

"Excuse me," she says, before making a mad dash from the table.

I rush after her, getting in the bathroom in time to hold her hair as she loses her dinner. When she's done, I run and grab her toothbrush and toothpaste for her.

## Chapter 38

### Ruby

I can't believe I threw up in the middle of family dinner. How humiliating. Effrem is taking it in stride. Then again, he's taken everything in stride. The King's leave tomorrow, and I need to figure out a place to live. I could go back to the bed and breakfast. Cece told me I was welcome to stay as long as I'd like.

Effrem tells me he'll be right back and runs out of the bathroom. He comes back in a couple minutes later with my toothbrush and toothpaste.

"Thank you."

"I've got your back."

I hope he means that. My legs wobble at the thought of doing this all alone. I have no idea how to be a parent. Effrem catches me. He puts the lid down, sits on the toilet, and puts me in his lap.

“What’s wrong, spitfire?”

“I’m terrified.” I admit, letting the tears flow freely down my face.

“Let it all out, Ruby. You’ve been holding too much in.”

Having permission broke the dam, I cried. I sobbed. I ugly cried until I was so tired, I could barely hold my eyes open.

“Let’s wash your face. Do you want to tell everyone tonight or wait for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

Effrem carried me out of the bathroom and tucked me into his bed. The same bed I’d been in since the day I was attacked. Henever asked me to move back to the guest room and I didn’t offer. His kids not only took it in stride, they encouraged the relationship.

Although nothing was said out loud, it’s like everyone knew. Each of them shared stories of Evie with me and told me how happy they were to see their dad smile. Jessi even told me that her mom would approve. Talk about a lump in your throat moment.

## Page 64

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I stayed in the bedroom until it was close to lunchtime. By the time I make it to the kitchen, everyone is at the island making their own pizza. Clyde spots me first. He stops making his pizza to come over and give me a hug.

“How are you feeling today?”

“Better, thank you.”

“Are you ready to taste the winning pizza?”

I laugh. I got roped into helping judge the pizza contest.

“I am. I brought my appetite.”

“Good. I’m getting ready to put the winning pie in the oven right now.” Xavier says, joining us.

“Don’t let me keep you.” I say with a laugh.

Effrem hands me a drink and leads me outside. He has heaters set up on the patio so we can have the event on the back patio. The pizza oven is already at work. Jessi is standing next to it.

She sees me and smiles and waves. I wave back.

“She really likes you.” Effrem whispers in my ear.

“I really like her. The boys too. You have an amazing family.”

“A family that’s clearly already adopted you.”

I feel a pang of guilt. Like I’m deceiving them. I shake off the feeling and sip on my ice water. There are slices of orange and lime in it. I think it’s cute he’s known for less than twenty-four hours and already has my caffeine intake in mind. I usually have sweet tea. I’ll have to ask the doctor about tea and coffee. How much is safe. How much is too much.

I made a mental note to make an appointment with the doctor next week. Then I get slammed with the sudden realization. I don’t even have a primary care physician in town yet, much less an OBGYN. I feel a large hand squeeze mine.

“Are you alright? You’ve gone pale.”

“I need to stop that. The kids are going to think I’m a wilting flower.”

“The kids are going to be over the moon.”

“You think so?”

“I do.”

“Can we tell them now? I’m afraid if I wait, I’ll throw up the pizza. I desperately want to keep the pizza down. I’m borderline hangry.”

He laughs loud enough that he draws the family’s attention to our direction.

“What’s so funny, dad?” Clyde asks.



“Ruby is getting hangry, but we have a quick announcement to make before we eat. Can I please have everyone’s attention?”

Everyone gathers around us. I take a few deep breaths. Effrem squeezes my hand, then leans in close.

“The floor’s yours spitfire.”

“I’m not really sure how to say this. So here goes. I’m pregnant. Effrem and I are expecting.”

“Told you he likes her.” Jessi says, racing across the patio to throw her arms around me.

I hugged

her back. Tears pricking at my eyes.

## Page 65

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“Yes. I’m not the baby anymore,” Clyde exclaims.

Effrem chuckles again. I turn my attention to Dalton. He looks back at me. A thoughtful look on his face.

“Guess that means I can’t ask you out on a date now, huh.”

I laugh, which breaks the tension. Dalton closes the distance between us and gives me a hug.

“I don’t think I can call you, ma.”

I laugh.

“We can have a double wedding.” Jessi says and laughs.

“Woah. Hold your horses. We only started dating last week.”

### Chapter 39

Effrem

The kid’s left a week ago. Ruby moved back to the Bennett’s bed-and-breakfast. I’d hoped she would stay with me, but she says we’re not ready yet. Maybe she’s right. This is fast, but I’m not backing down. I’m not going anywhere.

Maybe I should court her. I wake up the laptop I’d been working on earlier and look

up the number for Buttons & Bows. It's the only florist we have in town. Finding it, I punch the number into my cell and hit send.

Someone answers on the second ring. "Buttons and Bows, this is Felicia. What can I craft for you today?"

"Felicia, this is Sheriff Reeves. Do you deliver to the Broken B?"

"We sure do."

"Good. I want you to make something beautiful. Romantic. I want it to make a statement but not go overboard."

"Who am I delivering to, and what would you like the card to read?"

"Deliver to Ruby Cline at the B and B. The card should read: May I pick you up for dinner at seven?"

"Got it. I'll send you the bill."

"Thank you, Felicia."

"You're welcome, sheriff."

Hanging up the phone, I call Arnault's next and make a reservation.

Ruby

Thanks to Cece, I now have a PCP and an OBGYN. It's ridiculously early to know I'm pregnant. Still, I'm following doctor's orders and I'm taking prenatal vitamins. I'm back at the bed and breakfast in my old room.

Effrem asked me to stay, but he's not ready yet. I'm not either, truth be told. I'm not even officially divorced from Roger yet. Though I have taken to using my maiden name, Cline. While my apartment is a total loss, the bakery isn't. It'll take at least a month of work to get it ready for the grand-opening.

I'm trying to figure out the best way to participate in the upcoming cherry festival. Cece said the council is getting a huge response and the McGraw's are getting plenty of orders for their back stock. I could rent a booth in the town center. Many people do that.

The town is advertising in the surrounding towns as well. A knock on my door interrupts my thoughts. I open it to find Jack with a gigantic bouquet in his arms.

"Miss Ruby, these were just delivered at the front."

"Thank you, Jack."

I take the beautiful flowers and smell them. They smell heavenly. I set them on the dresser and pull the card.

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May I pick you up for dinner at seven?"

Effrem

With a huge smile on my face. I sent him a quick text and accept his dinner invitation.

Effrem

Ruby sent me a text to accept the dinner invitation. I sent her one back to let her know where we're going. I didn't want to be responsible for a wrong outfit choice. That happened once with Evie. Once was enough.

The day passes quickly. I have just enough time to get home, shower, and change before heading to the Broken B to pick up Ruby. I park at the B and B with five minutes to spare. Hurrying out of the truck, I take the steps two at a time going through the front door then to Ruby's room.

I knocked on the door. When she opens it, my breath catches in my throat. She's wearing a deep blue velvet dress that makes her eyes pop and her porcelain skin glow.

I whistle. "Damn, you look fine, Ruby Cline."

She laughs. "Nice rhyme."

"You look good enough to eat." I say, pulling her to me and devouring her mouth.

I kiss her until we're both breathing heavy. She's leaning against me, one hand on my chest, the other wrapped around the back of my neck.

"I missed you."

She blushes. "I missed you too."

"Ready for dinner?"

She pats her stomach. "We're starving,"

We held hands on the way to the parking lot. I open the door and help her up into the truck. I even lean in and fasten her seatbelt before getting into the driver's side.

Ruby

That kiss was hot. So freaking hot. My panties are damp. The man has no clue he's sex on a stick. I don't know how the women in town kept their hands off him all these years. I blow into town and don't last a week before I'm pregnant.

The thought still blows my mind. All these years Roger lied to me, but why? He wanted children. His father was always pressuring him to continue the family line.

Willem was insistent the child had to be of his blood. We couldn't adopt and please him. I wanted to adopt anyway or use a surrogate. Roger shot down those options and told his father we wouldn't be going to fertility specialist after fertility specialist. Now I know why he refused. All this time, I thought he was sticking up for me. I should have known better.

"I found an OB. I'll go next month to get an ultrasound. Do you want to go with me?"

Effrem reaches for my hand, entwining it in his.

“I’d go to all the appointments with you if you’d let me.”

“Really?”

“Really, I know we talked about taking things slow and the baby changes that, but there’s no need for us to speed up so much that either of us feel uncomfortable.”

This man never ceases to give me a lot to think about. He takes time to explain the why of things to me instead of saying no and that’s it. Being in a relationship like this is going to take some getting used to.

## Chapter 40

Ruby

We came to a stop at a place called Arnault’s. They have valet parking. I didn’t think Wolf Creek had anything this fancy. Not that I need it, but it’s nice. The outside design is surprisingly Spanish, with a French name like Arnault’s. It’s stucco with clay tile roofing. The lobby has stone floors and white walls with what I’d call rustic French Country decor done in blues and greens.

When the Maître d' seats us. I note the large butcher block tables and wooden chairs. The tables covered in fine white linen while the chairs boasted changed covered seating and drapery. An efficient team changed out the linens on a far table while we were escorted to our cozy corner booth.

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Candles lit the restaurant, adding warmth to the ambience.

“After you,” Effrem says.

I slide into the booth and he slides in, putting his arm around me. I can easily slide out the other side when I need to visit the powder room.

I look over the menu, delighted to see it’s in French and English.

“Effrem, I love French food. It’s my guilty pleasure.”

“I had no idea. It’s the best restaurant in town unless you want steak. Spotted Horse has the best steak in the tri-state area. They’ve won dozens of competitions.”

“We’ll have to try it sometime. I love a well-marbled rib-eye. Maybe I can talk the chef out of their secret.”

Effrem laughs. “Part of their secret is my ranch. The Busted Knuckle provides their beef.”

“I need to dig around your freezer more.”

“You’re welcome to it any time. My door is open for you. I hope you consider it your door as well.”

“Well, isn’t this cozy?”



My heart stops for a beat or three. I know that voice. I look up to find Roger standing over our table with a sneer on his face. Our server comes back with a chilled bottle of what looks like wine, but I know better. It's likely sparkling apple cider. We toasted with it on New Year's Eve. Effrem thought of everything and has known me for a month.

The man in front of us, on the other hand, has known me most of my life and never once done anything as thoughtful. The server looks at Effrem. "Shall I bring another glass?"

"No, he won't be staying. I'll pour for us. If you'll start the appetizers, I called in earlier."

He turns his attention to me after the server leaves. "Cece made a few suggestions. I hope you don't mind."

I laugh, my spirits lifted, and shake my head. "Not at all. We were talking about French food earlier. Oh, that girl is sneaky."

Effrem chuckles. "She'll love you for calling her girl."

"Hello, I'm standing right here. Don't ignore me." Roger says with a pout.

I roll my eyes. "Why are you here, Roger?"

"Why didn't you sign the final papers?"

"I think you know why. Or did you need me to spell it out for you and whoever is likely listening."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

“That’s not surprising. You’re not the brightest bulb in the pack.”

Yes, I’m baiting him. After all, Asshat was smart enough to pull the wool over my eyes for far too long. Effrem pours our glasses full of sparkling liquid. I take mine and drink half of it in one long gulp.

“You’re disgusting. Drinking while you’re pregnant.”

I stiffen, then squeeze Effrem’s hand. I’ve got this. I also know he’s giving me room to do what I need to do. I have zero doubt he’ll step in at some point.

“How can I be pregnant, Roger? I’m sterile, after all. That’s what the specialist you took me to swore to.”

Roger sputtered, then narrowed his eyes. “I know you are pregnant. Whore. Did you spread your legs for the first man you saw?”

“Call her that again and I’m going to forget I’m a lawman and punch you. We clear.”

“Oh, do you think I’m scared of you? A small town sheriff. I’m shaking in my boots. Who do you think you are, the Lone Ranger?”

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“No, I’m his great, great, great, great, grandson. Five generations of law enforcement, son. Fuck around and find out how a small town sheriff takes out the trash.”

### Chapter 41

Effrem

I stroked the back of Ruby’s hand with my thumb. I’m so damned proud of her for staying calm and for trusting me with the sparkling cider. This one is a mixture of peach and apple. She liked it best on New Year’s day when Xavier made faux mimosas for everyone with it.

Jessi’s already blowing up my phone about having a baby shower and am I going to turn the guest room into a nursery. When is Ruby moving in and when am I going to get off it and ask her already. All things my daughter has texted me in the last week.

I watch Roger’s body language throughout the confrontation. I sent a text to Boyd as soon as he showed up. He’s wanted for questioning as a suspect in the bakery fire. Blow hard was fine bullying Ruby. The moment I step in, sweat beads at his brow.

I top off Ruby’s glass. She smiles and takes another long drink before smiling at Roger.

“It’s just like you to throw something good away.”

Barb thrown at Ruby and turns his attention to me.

“I guess you’re not the father, or do you care about FASD?”

“Let me set a few things straight, Buffet, but first, what do you think you know, and where did you get the information?”

He smirks. “Wouldn’t you like to know. I have a copy of blood test results confirming one Ruby Buffet is pregnant. You lose! Everything.”

I squeeze Ruby’s hand to let her know I got this.

“Not according to the real prenup. You’re legally separated, which allows both of you to see others without breaching the prenup. Problem is Roger, you stepped outside your marriage on multiple occasions. I have the exact number in a file. The same file that the judge has seen, along with the state's attorney and several federal officials.

“Also, I should point out. I’m the father of three, soon to be four. Something you can’t say, Roger, because you’re the one that’s sterile.”

Ruby gasps beside me. Roger’s face turns red. He’s about to blow. The last is an educated guess. Unlike him, Gillian didn’t break any laws to get medical records. She also didn’t tell me what she found in his medical records. Not until she can meet with Ruby.

“How dare you throw out false accusations. I’ll sue you for defamation.”

“It’s only defamation if it's false. Is it false?”

“It’s none of your business. You’re still letting a pregnant woman drink.”

“First, Ruby does what she wants. It’s not about me letting her or not. Second, we’re drinking sparkling cider because I’m not an idiot. I thought enough about my

girlfriend and our unborn child to have the restaurant prepare a cold bottle. Somehow I doubt you'd have that much forethought, not where it concerns someone else's needs.

Before Roger replied, Deputies Boyd and Jeffries show up.

"Roger Buffet, you're under arrest on suspicion of arson, conspiracy to commit a felony, and anything else I can think of."

Boyd grabbed his hands and put it behind his back before he put the cuffs on him and read him his Miranda rights.

"I'll be out in an hour. I'll sue the city."

"Good luck with that. Judge is out of town until next Tuesday. You'll be a guest of Wolf Creek until then." I say with a smile.

As Boyd leads Roger out in cuffs, our server delivers our appetizers. Deviled eggs with caviar, bacon wrapped dates, and charred Spanish octopus.

"Will you split the French onion soup and Lyonnaise salad with me?"

"I will. Do you know what you want for the main course?"

"Rack of lamb."

"Good choice. I'm going with the steak and fries."

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“That sounds good, too.”

“I’ll share.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I mean, thank you for Roger. Do you really have evidence against him?”

“We do. He may not have set the fire, Ruby, but he was there.”

“Do you think he’s behind the break-in?”

“Likely. I’m sorry, Ruby.

“You have nothing to be sorry about. I’m the one that married a criminal.”

“You’re the one divorcing a criminal.”

## Chapter 42

### Ruby

The food was delicious. The company is even better, but I’m ready to go somewhere more private. It says pregnancy hormones kick in the second trimester. Maybe it has more to do with the man sitting next to me than pregnancy hormones. It’s been a

week.

I place my hand on his thigh. “Take me home.”

“Check, please.”

A short time later, we’re sitting in his truck in the parking lot, making out like teenagers. We even fog up the windows of the truck. I’m already on fire when he snakes a hand up my dress and pushes aside my panties.

‘You’re wet for me.’

“Yes,” I pant as he pushes a finger inside me.

A second finger joins the first one.

“Cum for me spitfire.”

He strokes that magic spot inside me and I come unglued, screaming his name.

“That’s my girl.” He pulls his fingers out and licks them clean.

“You taste better than the dessert we just had. I’m taking you home unless you want to go to b and b.”

“Take me home. Your home.”

Effrem starts the truck and heads towards his ranch. We hold hands along the way. The connection keeps my fire burning and my pussy wet. I can’t wait until he’s deep inside me. He parks the truck in the garage and comes around and helps me out. As soon as we enter the house, we strip off our clothes. There’s a trail of clothes leading

from the garage to the master bedroom.

When we get inside his room, I pull him to a stop. He turns my direction and I drop to my knees, coming face to face with his beautiful, thick cock.

“Hold that thought,” he says, hurrying to the bed.

Effrem grabs a pillow and tosses it on the floor in front of me before helping me on to it.

“Easier on your knees, spitfire.”

I nod my approval and wrap my hand around his thickness now that he’s standing in front of me. My hand doesn’t go all the way around his thickness. I stroke his hardness a few times before I swirl my tongue around the head of his cock. It’s dripping with precum. I lick it off with the tip of my tongue. He moans. I take the head of his cock into my mouth while I stroke his shaft with one hand. My other hand plays with his balls.



“Damn, that feels good, baby.”

Encouraged by his words, I take more of him into my mouth. He’s too long for me to get him all in. I get as much of him into my mouth as I can before I begin to bob up and down. His moans and groans of pleasure encourage me. I not only pick up the pace but increase the amount of pressure I’m using to suck.

“Fuck.” He cries out seconds before his cum fills my mouth. I swallow it all then lick him clean.

“I’m sorry, spitfire. That snuck up on me.”

I smile at him, taking his cock out of my mouth.

“I don’t mind. Tasty.”

“Speaking of, I want to taste more of you.”

Effrem helps me to my feet and leads me to the bedroom.

“Sit on the edge of the bed.”

I do as he says, sitting on the edge of the bed. He nudges my legs further apart before burying his face between my thighs. With the flat of his tongue, he licks me from ass to apex. I cry out as he sucks my clit into his mouth.

“Oh yes, that feels so good. Just like that.”

Effrem sucks and licks my pussy, eating it like he's a starving man. I moan and writhe, climbing closer to the edge. He slides two fingers inside me and starts a scissoring motion. It sends me over the edge. I cry out and cum all over his face.

"That's it spitfire. Soak my face."

He laps up all my juices before gently pushing me back on the bed. Before crawling over top of me. He puts my legs over his shoulders and lines the head of his cock to my entrance. He pushes inside me. I moan as he pushes inside me to the hilt. I feel so full.

"Yes, fill me up."

And he did. He pounds into me until I don't know where he stops and I end. Another orgasm slams into me. I cry out as I shatter around his cock.

## Chapter 43

Effrem

We have less than a week before the NorthStar Cherry festival. I'm working on pulling off a major surprise for the woman who's wormed her way into my heart. One day I'm fine being a widower. The next day my life is turned on its head and for the better.

Clyde switched to Oklahoma State University. It's less than two hours away. He can come home any time he wants. He's already been home twice in the last couple of weeks. Both times, he and Ruby went out to lunch or dinner.

I hadn't realized how much my boy needed a mom in his life until recently. He eats up all the attention Ruby gives him and for her part, she's jumped in with both feet.

Jessi calls her at least once a day and even Dalton's talked to her several times this month. Of all the kids, I thought he'd have the most trouble adjusting to my relationship with Ruby. She's only three years older than he is. Have I lost my freakin' mind? Yes, I think I have, and I don't plan on finding it anytime soon, if at all.

Ruby and I have been on several dates and I've got her to sleep over each night. I realized this morning when I woke up alone that I don't want to do that anymore. I want to wake up next to my little spitfire.

With only a few days left and a lot of work to do, I shift my focus to the upcoming surprise. A knock on my office door brings my attention to the present.

"Enter."

Nurse Goodwin opens the door, followed by Buck. I hurry out of my chair and move the chair so he can get in it easier.

"Thanks, bud."

"Any time."

"I'm going to leave you boys alone for a few. I saw a tray of baked goods in the break room."

I nod. "Ruby sent them with me this morning."

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Debbie smiles. “Good to know.”

“Buck, how are you feeling?”

“Other than stir crazy, not bad. What’s this I hear about you seeing someone?”

“Her name’s Ruby Cline. She’s the new bakery owner.”

“The one whose ex tried to burn it down?”

“Yup, he’s sitting in lock-up. Judge won’t let him out. He’s a flight risk.”

“Isn’t that guy like a billionaire? How did you meet his soon to be ex?”

“Pulled her over for speeding her first day in town.”

Buck chuckles. “Only you could turn a speeding ticket into a girlfriend. I never thought you’d find anyone again.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t either. I’ve already talked to Evie. She sent a cardinal.”

Buck looked shocked.

“The kids love her. Clyde’s moved to OSU and has been home twice since break to see her.”

“I’m floored. Speechless.”

I bring up my phone and snap a picture of Buck's face.

"What was that for?"

"I needed proof that you're speechless."

He flips me the bird and chuckles.

"You ready to stick me on desk duty. God, I never thought I'd see the day I'd ask to do paperwork."

"Has the doc cleared you?"

"For desk duty six hours a day to start."

"You can start on Monday. It'll give you time to fully enjoy the festival."

"The town's really going all out. There's pink and white lights all over town and giant light up cherries hanging across the streets like Christmas bells."

"They must've done that after I got here this morning. Town's been busy."

"They're all excited about the festival. You know Wolf Creek loves a good festival."

"Especially if it's to help others out."

"True. Our little town has a big heart."

I spent the next hour shooting the breeze with my deputy sheriff.

Chapter 44

Ruby

“How much longer do I have to wear this thing?”

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Effrem chuckles. “Not much longer, spitfire. I promise the blindfold will be well worth it.”

“Fine.” I huff out in mock annoyance.

Strong fingers reach for mine, entwining with them. He rubs his thumb over the back of my hand. A soothing habit he’s picked up during the last few weeks.

The truck comes to a stop.

“Wait here. I’ll be around to get you.”

I wait, rather impatiently. At least inside my head. The door opens and I feel Effrem’s hand on mine.

“Big step down, spitfire.”

I held onto the truck’s oh shit handle and Effrem’s hand and stepped out. He takes my elbow.

“Let me guide you. Two steps to the sidewalk.”

Two steps forward.

“Now one step up.”

I take one step up.

“You’re doing a great job. Now six steps straight ahead.”

We take six steps ahead. I hear a door open.

“Now, two more steps.”

I take two more steps.

“Are you ready?”

“I’ve been ready for thirty minutes.”

He chuckles. I take the blindfold off and gasp in surprise. The bakery is filled with townspeople and it’s all done. It’s one hundred percent completed. All repainted. Tables, chairs, new window dressing. I hold my hand up over my mouth in shock.

I turn to Effrem. “Did you do this?”

“I only got the ball rolling. Cece and Trixie ran with it.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

“Thank you. Thank you all so much.”

Emotions overwhelm me and I sob. Strong arms wrap around me.

“Damn pregnancy hormones, I mutter.”

I hear chuckles all around me. It takes a few minutes to get myself under control. Effrem hands me a handkerchief and I blot my eyes.



“Now I can make something for the festival.”

“You have volunteer sous chefs you can do a whole grand-opening on festival day if you want.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” Cece says, “and I’m one of them.”

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I spend the next little while thanking everyone before heading to the kitchen. All my pots and pans I'd taken to Effrem's and the boarding house are back in place. I check the pantry, fridge, and freezer. All restocked.

The next few hours, I go over the stock and scribble notes for my final recipes. Opening day every item I make will include NorthStar cherries with many featuring honey and cherry blossom honey.

Satisfied with my list and extensive plans for tomorrow to get everything ready for the five am opening on festival day, I'm ready to call it a day. I lock up the front and double check everything before heading out back.

Since Effrem drove me, I'll walk to the police station. He's on duty for another hour or so. I pull on my jacket and grab my purse. The cold weather has eased up a bit. It's a balmy forty-nine degrees today.

Festival day, the weather forecast calls for mid-fifties with a light breeze and sunshine. It'll be a beautiful day. I'm excited about the festival and for being a part of the town. I'm beyond touched by the towns act of kindness.

I turn the lights out and pull the door closed, locking it behind me. I feel something hard stick into my side

“Scream and I'll shoot you. You might survive, but I'll make sure your brat doesn't.”

“What do you want?”

“I want that prenup.”

Wait a minute. I know that voice.

“Willem.”

“Shut up. Tell me where the prenup is.”

“It doesn’t matter. The courts already have official copies; you can’t make them all go away.”

“The hell I can’t. Where is it?”

He shoves what I’m guessing is a gun into my side.

“I don’t have it.”

“You better get it.”

“I don’t have access to it. My attorney has it.”

“You’ll call her right now and get it.”

“My phone is in my purse.”

“You reach in real slow and get it. I have an itchy trigger finger.”

With trembling hands, I pull out my phone and bring up Gillian’s number. She picks up on the second ring.

“Hello.”

“Gillian, It’s Ruby Buffet. I need to get my copy of the prenup back.”

“Ruby, you don’t have a copy. You have the original.”

“That’s right, could you bring it with you when you come to dinner tonight? Effrem’s been dying to get you to try vegan lasagna with mushroom bolognese.”

“Ruby, are you in danger?”

“Yes, that’s right. Five is perfect. Could you meet me at Settler’s. I need your help with the wine choice.”

“Help is on the way, Ruby.”

I hang up the phone.

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“That might be the smartest thing you’ve ever done. Where is this Settler’s?”

“It’s a few blocks away. The only local grocery store.”

“My car’s out back. Keep following orders and you’ll get out of this alive.

### Chapter 45

Effrem

Less than two hours left on the clock and I’m free to go home and cook my woman and unborn child dinner. My cell phone rings. I answer.

“Gilli, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Ruby’s in trouble.”

“What do you mean? How do you know? Tell me everything.”

“I just got off the phone with Ruby. She asked me to bring her the prenup. She said you were making vegan lasagna and needed help picking wine.”

Gillian rattles off.

“Gilli, you’re not making sense.”

“Exactly. She didn’t make any sense, Eff. She’s in trouble. I’m to meet her at

Settler's at five."

"I'll meet you outside of town at four-thirty by the old mill."

"I'll be there."

I open the door of my office. "Boyd, Jeffries, get in here."

The deputies ran in the door.

"What's up, chief?" They ask at nearly the same time.

I tell them about the phone call with Gillian and a plan I have.

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Four thirty took forever to get here. I met with Gillian and my deputies outside the old mill. Together we went over the plan, refined it a half a dozen times, then went our separate ways to get in place. I get in place hidden behind a nearby building where I can see traffic coming in and out of the parking lot.

A few minutes until five, I see a late model sedan pull in. Ruby's in the driver's seat. A man a decade older than me in the passenger's seat. I narrow my eyes. He looks familiar. Then it hits me. It's Willem Buffet. Mother fucker.

He's got some balls on him. Soon he'll be in jail beside his son. Low life scum. There are days I long for Old West style justice. Where putting a bullet between the eyes of a bad guy was the right thing to do, always.

My heart in my throat I watch the car park and Ruby get out followed shortly by Willem. He had a gun on her. I figured as much. He knows enough to keep it hidden

from the public but as a trained professional I spot it easily. So will my deputies.

The whole scene plays out in front of me in slow motion. Gillian approaches them with the papers. Not the original but the idiot doesn't know that. These papers are mocked up to look exactly like the original, including the court seal.

Willem grabs the papers, then points the gun at Ruby.

Jeffries and Boyd jump out of hiding telling him to drop the gun. I pull my pistol and take up the second I see Willem's finger on the trigger I shoot.

Two shots to the chest. Jeffries grabs Ruby and pulls her out of the way split-second before Willem's finger reflexively pulls the trigger of his own gun. I sprint across the street and gather Ruby into my arms.

She's sobbing. Hell tears are running down my face. I could have lost her. I could've lost them both. I kiss the top of her head.

"You're safe, baby. I've got you."

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Ruby pulls back, starts to speak, then spots Willems body and pukes. I hold her hair while she empties the contents of her stomach all over the pavement. I rub her back while I hold her hair.

The sirens from the ambulance are growing closer.

“It’s all over sweet girl. You’re safe.”

Gillian came over to us. She looked a little pale but no worse for the wear. She put her arms around Ruby too. I let her go long enough to speak with the EMTs and my deputies.

I wrap up things with the EMTs and my deputies and take Ruby home.

After getting her some hot tea and painkillers I tuck her into bed while I make dinner. Gillian is staying the night at the ranch with us. She plans on helping Ruby at the bakery tomorrow.

Once I get everyone situated for the night, I pour three fingers of my best scotch and head outside. I take a seat and watch the moon rise in the sky. Things have surely changed in the last few weeks. I found a new love of my life and I’ve come close to losing her tonight.

My life is no longer in a holding pattern. I think I was biding time until I could be with Evie.



Ruby

January 20th

I wake up gasping for air, shaking and crying, for the second day in a row. I dreamed Wilhelm was trying to strangle me. Strong arms wrap around me.

“Ruby, you’re okay baby. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

I relax into his arms and let the tears flow. Last night I was terrified.

“Talk to me, spitfire, tell me about yesterday.”

“I knew Wilhelm would try to kill me. He’d been full of vitriol the entire time we waited. He belittled me for everything he could think of that happened over the last twenty years. He even blames me for Roger’s sterility.”

“He’ll never blame you for anything again, spitfire. Roger’s never going to see the light of day again. I’ll make sure there are enough charges. He’ll never even see a parole board.”

I turn and sob into his chest. “Is it really, truly over?”

“It’s over baby. Roger can’t hurt you again. Your divorce was final at midnight. You’re a free woman.”

“I’m officially Ms. Ruby Cline. Hallelujah.”

“How about I make you breakfast?”

“Do we have time? It’s festival day?”

He pretends to look offended. “Of course, we have time to feed you and my baby.” He adds the last, putting his hand on my belly. It’s a habit of his since he found out. I think it’s adorable.

After a breakfast of French toast and link sausage, we head to the bakery. Gillian follows us. Cece arrives before I’m even out of the truck. She opens my door before Effrem gets around the front.

“There she is. Our star baker. Are you ready for the grand-opening?”

“You’re way too chipper for three-thirty in the morning.”

“That’s because I’ve had a pot of coffee. Let’s go inside so I can brew more.”

I laugh and open the bakery. My friends and boyfriend pour inside all of them, heading to their pre-assigned task. We worked like a well oil machine for the next hour and a half. Five minutes until opening, I’m completing today’s selections on the chalkboard. I stand back when the last morsel is written and take a picture of the board. I’m going to get it framed.

Sweet Serenade

Cherry pies with honey

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Black pepper cherry pies

Cherry cheesecake rolls

Dried cherry, sage, sourdough rolls

Cherry pie

Mini cherry pie

Cherry chocolate chip cookies

Cherry chip cake with cherry blossom frosting

Cherry Bacon bread

Dried cherry sourdough with rosemary and sea salt

Cherry alligator with cherry blossom honey

Sugar cookies frosted with cherry blossom icing

Cream horns filled with cherry cream

Cherry filled chocolate eclairs

Cherry cheesecake

Mini cherry cheesecake

Double chocolate cherry espresso brownies

That's all I can fit on the chalkboard menu. I realize I'll have to offer less or order a second chalkboard.

"My stomach is growling just looking at the menu spitfire." Effrem says, dropping a kiss on my cheek. You go get behind the counter in case of stampede and I'll unlock the door and let the patrons in."

"I really want one of those brownies."

He kisses the tip of my nose. "I'm sorry, spitfire. Espresso of any kind is a no no until after our little bundle is safely delivered around mid-August."

I stick my tongue out at him and walk behind the counter. He chuckles.

"That's my spitfire."

The next seven hours fly by. We're closing at noon today to take part in the festivities before tonight's awards and dinner. I sold out of everything. I can't even believe it. EVERYTHING.

## Chapter 47

Effrem

What a whirlwind of a day. I'm exhausted but the night is young and I have a hot date. The ladies all went to get changed. I think they took over one of the downstairs bathrooms. I saw someone delivering dresses and toiletries earlier.

Everyone is getting seated. I'm waiting for my cue. The announcer is going to talk. Then he'll call me out to announce the winner. We asked everyone to vote for their favorite cherry item. The townsfolk made food, drink, bath products, and a few other things I can't remember off the top of my head.

I listen as the Mayor makes her speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please help me welcome Sheriff Reeves."

I walk out on stage and wave. I hate this part of my job, but I'm good at it. It's part of what they pay me to do. The mayor smiles at me when I reach her side.

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“Before the Sheriff announces the winner of the First Annual NorthStar Cherry Festival. I want to bring the person responsible for all this up on stage. Ruby Cline, could you please come up here?”

My mouth falls open when my Ruby stands up. She’s wearing a short black dress that hugs her curves perfectly. Black heels add another three inches to her five-foot, eleven-inch frame, putting us eye to eye.

When she reaches us, the Mayor steps aside and I take my place in front of Ruby. I listen as the Mayor thanks Ruby for planting the seed in Cece’s ear and giving the town its newest festival. The audience stood and applauded. I waited until the applause died down before making my move.

I drop to one knee in front of her. “Ruby from the moment you sped into my life you’ve turned my whole world upside down. I can’t imagine my life without you in it.

“I’m sorry it took me a while. I was already blessed with one great love. I had no idea the good Lord had a second in store for me. I love you with all my heart. Will you do me the honor of spending every day for the rest of our lives together. I want to wake up next to you and go to sleep beside you. Make me the happiest man on earth and marry me?”

Tears track down her face.

“Yes.”

The moment she says yes, I pull the ring from my pocket. I chose a ruby for the center. It has a three carat round center stone with a halo of diamonds around it and diamonds around the band.

“You got me a ruby?”

“I did, spitfire.”

“I love you.”

The crowd burst into applause again. A standing ovation that lasted quite awhile.

Epilogue

Eleven months later

Ruby

“Mom, can you help me with the clasp?”

I smile at Jessi. She started calling me mom a couple of months before the twins were born. Effrem and I had a small ceremony here at the ranch on January twenty-fifth. Cece pulled off a miracle, getting it catered, and the family all together.

I made the cake with the help of my friends. And half the town showed up. We danced until my feet hurt and I’d downed two bottles of sparkling apple cider by myself.

I helped Jessi with the clasp on the strand of pearls I’d gifted her for her wedding. I purchased them new. While I’d gotten all the jewelry as part of the divorce, I sold it all and gave it to charity. Effrem and I are still deciding what to do with all that

money.

Turns out I got just over half a billion. I'm thinking the town could use a small hospital or at least a clinic with hospital facilities. Once we have a few more ideas, we'll run them past the town council. I surveyed my daughter's dress. It's a beautiful white mermaid style with thousands of crystal beads.

"You look stunning. You're going to take his breath away."

She hugs me and kisses my cheek.

"Thank you, mom. I can't believe it's my wedding day."

"And Christmas Eve. Your father has the new sleigh all ready to carry off the happy couple."

She laughs. "Of course he does. He's been looking for a reason to decorate that thing ever since you found it. I'm surprised he didn't hire a white carriage and matching horses."

"I vetoed that idea."

"I knew there was a reason I loved you."

"Only one?"

"No. There are dozens. You've made my dad happy. I haven't seen him smile like this since mom died. She always smoothed his rough edges and helped him bridge the gap between us. He learned to do that without her, but you add something to him. A softness that wasn't there before. The way he looks at you and the twins."



“Is the same way Kai looks at you and the reason your father let you marry before you graduate.”

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“It’s only a semester. Six more months then we’re headed home. We’re both starting at Gilli’s firm until we get enough experience to open our own.”

“I’d be honored to invest when the time comes.”

She hugs me tight. “You’re the most generous, kind person I know.”

“I love you. You make it easy to be kind too.”

“You’re kind to everyone. Who’s watching the twins while Dad walks me down the aisle?”

“Cece got the honors. I thought there was going to be a brawl.”

The twins Elijah James and Evie Jayne were born on July twenty-seventh. Three weeks before their due date of August fourteenth. We had no lack of offers for babysitters. In fact we had so many offers we started drawing names to make it fair.

Both Clyde and Dalton are standing up with Kai or one if not both of them would have the twins. They adored their younger siblings. Dalton found a five hundred acre ranch a few miles from us. He settled in a few weeks after the twins were born.

This year for our anniversary we’re taking a long weekend away. Somewhere, Effrem refuses to tell me what we have planned, only that I shouldn't pack much. He plans for me to be naked the entire time.

A knock on the door interrupts us. I open the door. My breath catches in my throat at

the sight of my husband in a tux with tails. Of course I think he looked just as hot in his black jeans and boots, and hat when we got married. He wore a black pearl button shirt with a silver and black paisley vest and a bolo tie with silver tips.

I'm married to a real life hero who's family started out as legends of the Old West.

"Ready girls?"

"We are." Jessi and I say at the same time.

I hurry and take my seat moments before the bridal march starts. The tears start the moment I spot them walking down the aisle. They continue on and off through the ceremony and reception.