

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

A man wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and a white cowboy hat sits on a red and black plaid picnic blanket. He is smiling and looking towards a woman. The woman has long dark hair, is wearing a white t-shirt and a colorful patterned skirt, and is also smiling back at him. They are sitting in a grassy field with a wooden fence in the background. In the distance, there are rolling hills and a few buildings under a warm, golden sunset sky. A wicker picnic basket with a red and white checkered cloth is on the blanket next to the woman. The scene is framed by the branches and leaves of a large tree on the left side.

The Bull Rider's
Homecoming
Allie Pleiter

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The Bull Rider's Homecoming

«HarperCollins»

Pleiter A.

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Healing The Cowboy's Heart When Luke Buckton left Blue Thorn Ranch, he'd hoped to return in a blaze of rodeo glory—instead he's limping home with a busted leg. To get back on the circuit he'll need physical therapist Ruby Sheldon's help. Six years ago, he left Ruby behind, convinced she was too innocent for such a public life. Now his high school sweetheart is stronger, tougher, and even more captivating. A high-profile success story like this could make Ruby's career. All she has to do is rein in Luke's bullheadedness, heal his injuries—and hope his reckless charm doesn't trample her heart...

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"You're punishing me," he huffed.

"I'm treating you. You're the one who set the ambitious goal on the tight time frame."

"It's not the exercises, darlin', it's the attitude. You want me to hurt."

She took the bull by the horns. "I do not want to hurt you."

He stopped again. "You should. I hurt you."

It took Ruby a moment to decide how to respond.

"Yes, you did." In for a penny, in for a pound. "You hurt me deeply, Luke Buckton."

Luke stopped walking, holding her gaze for a moment. His blue eyes looked like their depths went on forever. "I know that."

"Did you know it when you left? Did you think about it at all?"

"I wouldn't let myself think about it at first. I let all the dreams and the money dangling in front of my face crowd it out."

"You said such...hurtful things."

She heard him sigh. "I needed to burn the bridges behind me. I figured we'd both be better off if you hated me."

"It doesn't work that way, Luke."

Dear Reader,

This novel represents our fourth visit to the Blue Thorn Ranch, a place and family I've come to know and love. God has taken each of the Buckton siblings (and their cousin) on journeys of faith and purpose, and it's my prayer that your faith has been strengthened by their stories.

If you've not yet enjoyed the other three books in the series, *The Texas Rancher's Return*, *Coming Home to Texas*, and *The Texan's Second Chance*; please do! There will be one more book in the series coming out in September 2017, so keep watch for it.

As always, I love to hear from readers. You can reach my website at alliepleiter.com, email me at allie@alliepleiter.com, like my Facebook page at facebook.com/alliepleiter, or connect with me on Twitter at twitter.com/alliepleiter (@alliepleiter) or Pinterest at pinterest.com/alliepleiter. Of course, if good old mail is your thing, you can always reach me at P.O. Box 7026, Villa Park, IL 60181. I'm looking forward to hearing from you!

Blessings,



ALLIE PLEITER, an award-winning author and RITA® Award finalist, writes both fiction and nonfiction. Her passion for knitting shows up in many of her books and all over her life. Entirely too fond of French macarons and lemon meringue pie, Allie spends her days writing books and avoiding housework. Allie grew up in Connecticut, holds a BS in speech from Northwestern University and lives near Chicago, Illinois.

The Bull Rider's Homecoming

Allie Pleiter



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My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.

—2 Corinthians 12:9

To physical therapists everywhere
who help so many to heal.

[Acknowledgments](#)

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[Chapter One](#)

Luke Buckton stood on the porch of the Blue Thorn Ranch, his childhood home, disgusted at how he needed to grip the handrail to keep his balance.

Pain came with a life spent trying to stay on top of 1,700 pounds of bucking bull. Every bull rider knew pain went with the territory. Bull riding was dangerous—that's what made it exciting. And profitable, if done right. Sure, you got hurt—everyone got hurt—but you “cowboyed up” after an injury and got back in there, period. Luke hadn't come close to winning the Touring Pro Series championship by paying attention to pain. He ignored it.

The numbness he fought now? That was a whole other kind of enemy. It messed with his mind and defied submission. Luke could ride in pain, could win in pain—he had, in fact, on dozens of occasions. Now, he couldn't always tell where his leg ended and the ground began. He could think “stand” but couldn't feel it, even when he was standing. That threatened his career worse than the largest, meanest bull on earth.

It made him mad. And the anger and frustration made him mean to just about everyone, including his grandmother who'd just come up behind him.

“How are you feeling?” Gran asked as she approached him with a cup of coffee. He'd left six years ago in such a fury of pride and defiance—and had returned home so full of bitterness and dissatisfaction—that he couldn't quite understand how Gran found it possible to be nice to him.

Luke took the coffee and gave Gran the answer he gave everyone: “Better.” Most days it wasn't true. It wasn't true today.

His hometown of Martins Gap was as gossipy as a small Texas town could get. In the days and weeks since he'd returned, he'd heard the whispers, caught the rumors and ignored the stares. Isn't that Luke Buckton, home on the Blue Thorn? Did you see he limps now?

Luke had always envisioned his eventual return to Martins Gap as the grandest of victory laps—a homecoming for the local golden boy whose future had always been too big for this place. He'd planned to come home a national champion.

If Dad was still alive, wouldn't he have had a field day with how those plans turned out?

Gran sipped her tea. “The new therapist is due about now, isn't she?”

Luke didn't buy his grandmother's sugar-sweet tone. He knew full well Gran wanted to take a switch to him for the way he'd treated the last two therapists they'd sent. It was so clear to Luke they weren't up to the challenge that he'd grouched them away in a single session each. He didn't have time or patience to pussyfoot around with careful exercises or gentle treatments. Luke needed to hit this fast and hard so that he could recover and get back to work. Anyone who wasn't on board with that strategy was useless.

Which meant he had a pretty good idea of who was about to come up the drive. Had planned for it, in fact.

He shifted his foot, reaching to feel the give of the porch boards underneath his boot. Nothing. It was beyond infuriating. “At ten.”

“So...you think it'll be her?” Gran asked, as if it were an innocent question.

Two could play at that game. “Who?” he asked in equally innocent tones.

Gran swatted him. Hard. For eighty-five, that woman could still hold her own. “You know who. Don't think I can't see exactly what you're doing. If you wanted Ruby Sheldon to be your therapist—and I certainly can't imagine why she'd ever agree to such a notion—you should have just asked for her.”

As if it were that simple. Luke didn't truly know if he wanted Ruby to be his therapist. He'd hoped there was another way. It'd be much simpler with someone else, that was sure. Only the two others his doctor had sent clearly weren't up to the job, at least not by his estimation. And that left going all the way to Austin to get treatment, or putting up with Ruby.

Putting up with Ruby. As if she was a nagging itch or an uncomfortable chair instead of the biggest regret and saddest chapter of his life. He'd never quite forgiven himself for how he'd broken Ruby's heart, despite six years of steady effort to keep all thoughts of her firmly out of his head. It stuck in his craw to need her help now, and he wasn't sure he could choke that down even if she might be the only person in twenty miles who knew him well enough to get him where he needed to go. "I was hoping to avoid this." He grumbled. "I think I'd rather cut off my leg than give Ruby the chance to order me around."

Gran's eyes narrowed. "Don't you ever talk like that." He knew Gran loved him, but she'd never minced words about what she thought of his choice to leave home to join the bull riding circuit. It didn't matter how good he was at it, or how he rose in the rankings, Gran still thought it "dangerous nonsense that took him away from family" and told him so. Of course, that was only when he bothered to call her, which had been woefully rare until the gut-wrenchingly humble call of "can I come home?" three weeks ago. Had there been any other way...

Had there been any other way, he wouldn't be standing on the Blue Thorn Ranch waiting to see if Ruby Sheldon dared to show up back in his life. Suddenly, he wanted to do this moment on his own terms, not under Gran's scrutiny. "I'll be waiting in the guesthouse." With that, he took his coffee and his cane and made his way across the clearing to the closest thing he had to "his own turf" on Blue Thorn land.

* * *

The Blue Thorn Ranch.

Ruby couldn't quite believe she was back here, about to see Luke Buckton. Funny and sad how life worked in circles.

The physical buildings and layout of the ranch hadn't changed. The big house still boasted the front porch swing where she and Luke had plotted his dazzling rodeo career. The horse barn where he'd first kissed her—a stunning surprise of a kiss she hadn't ever dreamed could really happen—still stood facing west across the pastures. The ranch had come back to life since her high school days dating Luke. Back then it had had a desperate sort of taint, like fabric fraying around the edges. A once-prosperous ranch sliding down in decline despite the desperate efforts of Luke's father to hold it together.

Now, the ranch gave off the air of new life, of the fresh start Luke's brother, Gunner, had launched after taking over a few years earlier. The place struck her as both familiar and different.

And soaked in too many memories.

This guy's meaner than the bulls he used to ride, one note from the therapist at the other agency had said. I'm not going back there. Let someone in Austin have at him.

I can't handle him, another note complained. I say let this cowboy recover on someone else's watch.

It had been such a huge blessing when Ruby's clinical instructor and mentor, Lana Donmeyer, chose to make Ruby a partner in her practice and allow Ruby to open a satellite facility here in Martins Gap. Even if Lana called Ruby "bright and gifted," to land this type of semi-partnership setup fresh out of school was practically unheard of. Dad's life insurance money was supposed to be for Mama, not funding a fledgling practice. She'd pay Mama back, even if Mama said her staying close in Martins Gap to help with Grandpa was payment enough.

Luke Buckton could be a landmark patient for her. As a high profile rider, with a high profile injury, getting Luke back on his feet could really launch her career. Even Lana said so. Yes, there

was so much history between them. But today was her chance to show that cowboy what she was made of now that six years had gone by.

She'd been full of resolve...until she pulled up to the big house. The sight of the place quickly dissolved into a blur of memories that overthrew her control.

She'd been so happy here.

She'd been so miserable here.

A quick look around as she got out of the car revealed no one but "Granny B" standing on the house's big porch. Ruby found herself telling her limbs to get out of the car.

"Ruby," came Adele Buckton's warm voice as she hobbled down off the porch. "My stars, but it's Ruby Sheldon."

"Hi, Granny B." The words belonged to some eighteen-year-old version of herself, young and squeaky. It wasn't as if they hadn't crossed paths over the years, small as Martins Gap was, but neither of them could pretend this was anything but awkward and difficult.

"Look at you." Her gaze fell to the folder in Ruby's hand. "You're here for Luke." Somehow Granny B made the simple statement sound as complex as it truly was.

"Yes, ma'am." She wished for something more clever to say, but came up short.

Ruby had always liked Granny B—the Buckton children all called her "Gran" but everyone else in town called her "Miss Adele" or "Granny B." The old woman had been as much of an anchor as Luke ever had in high school. Luke and his dad locked horns on a near constant basis, and Luke's mom had passed when he was eleven. Though he had three siblings—including a twin—they'd all pretty much been born with one foot out the door. Granny B had been the one responsible for anything that felt homey and welcoming about this place.

When Luke left town after graduation, Ruby had wanted—expected, actually—for Granny B to show up and make sense of how Luke broke things off. She'd always been so sure either Granny B or Luke's twin sister, Tess, would appear on her doorstep and explain why the boy she loved both left her and left Martins Gap without a backward glance. It had never happened.

Granny B's gaze lifted over Ruby's head to settle on the guesthouse behind them. Ruby turned to see the guesthouse door open up. The figure of Luke Buckton stood in half shadow behind the screen door.

"I'd best leave you to it, then," Gran was saying behind her.

Ruby's heart twisted and surged and stung all at the same time. A hollowed-out panic, an empty awareness froze her chest—all feelings that made no sense but surrounded her anyway as she stared at him.

He was just like the ranch—familiar yet different. The eyes were still their spell-binding blue—"Buckton blue," everybody called it—but now they were framed by tight features. His wild-boy hair still tumbled around that strong jaw, only now the jaw was roughened with a man's stubble. Luke had filled out into a man's body, lean and hard-edged, but even his defiant stance didn't quite conceal the hint of uncertainty that made him favor one leg. How he could be the boy of her memory and a stranger before her at the same time made Ruby's mind spin.

"Ruby." His voice, somehow octaves deeper now, held more challenge than welcome. "Why are you here?"

It was an absurd question—they both knew why she was here. His prickly tone held the faintest hint of the dismissive words he'd flung at her the night he told her he was leaving. Not just Martins Gap, but her as well.

The tone snapped something to life in her, resurrecting all the anger against him she'd swallowed down over the years. It was helpful—clearing her head and straightening her spine, giving her the composure to calmly call his bluff. "You need help."

Need and help weren't in Luke Buckton's vocabulary back then, and she doubted he was friendly with the concepts now.

She'd read the file. No one really knew what level of functionality Luke Buckton would get back from his left leg. Such injuries were unpredictable.

"Well, now, that's a matter of opinion," Luke replied as he flexed one hand against the doorknob. Rather flippant for someone in his position—but then again, that tactic had been a Luke Buckton specialty.

"No," she retorted, "I'd say that's a medical fact." When she saw the edge in his eyes give just a little, she pressed further. "Whether or not you're man enough to accept it...well, I expect that is a matter of opinion."

She'd never have spoken like that to any other patient, but no one could call Luke Buckton "any other patient." She heard Granny B mutter something that sounded approving and the big house door shut behind her.

Luke looked at her with an almost amused disdain, as if some uppity puppy had taken to yapping at one of the thousand-pound bison that were raised on the ranch. A "don't you know who you're dealing with?" warning glare. Frustration made people hard and sour, especially those for whom weakness was an unforgivable sin. She knew that his frustration was why he'd pushed away the other therapists, and it told her he was that frightened he wouldn't heal. And yet despite their history, he hadn't tried to hire in a therapist from Austin, even when he knew Ruby was the only option left in town. Which meant that while he'd never admit to it, he'd decided he needed her.

He'd done exactly the same thing in high school when they'd met as she tutored him in algebra. That boy had gone all "I don't need you" when she was the only thing standing between him and failing out his senior year.

Begrudgingly needing her had turned into respecting her, had turned into liking her, had turned into—she'd thought—loving her. That boy had made her feel pretty and full of possibility...only to turn around months later and declare her not pretty enough and without enough potential to follow him to rodeo stardom.

She suddenly realized it had been half a minute or so, and neither of them had spoken.

Luke shifted his weight again. It dawned on Ruby that while she could wait all day for this standoff to end, he could not. He'd been injured, and badly. He may be in possession of all the bravado, but she was in possession of the solution—if there was one.

"This won't work," he said under his breath but still loud enough for her to hear. How many times had she heard those words during Luke's tirades about algebra and graduation requirements?

The remark revealed just how much he needed this to work. He hadn't changed: the more he needed it, the less he'd act like he did. She could see it, clear as day, because sensing things about patients was her gift.

She did have a gift. The bravest, strongest version of herself looked Luke straight in the eye. She clutched her file and took a step toward him. "Won't work, huh? Prove it."

Chapter Two

The red scarf didn't suit her.

It was a weird thought to have, given the drama of seeing the girl you'd loved and left after so much time, but that was the first thing that went through his mind.

Ruby, despite her name, wasn't a red girl. She was more of a dusky pink, the color of Gran's roses that ran along the back of the house. Red was trying too hard.

The Ruby of his memory was a soft pink thing, kitten-like, full of wonder and amazed at whatever he did. She'd put him on a mile-high pedestal all through high school, and he'd liked that. Dad was lightning-quick with the put-downs, but Ruby looked at him—as Gran would put it—as if he hung the moon.

He'd given her plenty of reason to admire him when they'd gotten to know each other. He'd swept her off her feet. First by accident, just to distract her from the tutoring she was supposed to be giving him, and then on purpose. The more he got to know her, the more he liked her. He'd delighted

in romancing her with dramatic gestures and flat-out charm. By the spring of their senior year, like had turned to love.

And then he'd done her wrong. Dropped her as dramatically and abruptly as he'd swept her up. If he could manage to regret anything—which was a reach for the likes of him—what he'd done to Ruby would top the list.

Which made today excruciating on any number of levels.

Right at this moment, however, what topped his list was that he couldn't stand up much longer. The numbness was creeping up his leg, his sense of the floor beneath his left foot all but gone. If he turned to walk back into the house now, there was a fair chance his foot would drag against the ground, if not trip him outright. He'd left his cane back at the couch, determined to stand there on his own two feet and show her he was still strong. Now the only thing that felt strong was the throbbing in his wrist from the choke hold he currently had on the doorknob.

This was the part he hated the most—he couldn't tell if his knee would hold him or buckle, if his ankle would bend or drag. It was as if his body had dismembered itself, splitting off into strange pieces that refused to talk to each other.

It'd be so much easier if it just hurt, just as it would be so much simpler if it didn't have to be Ruby.

As it was, she walked up to the guesthouse and stood waiting for an invitation to enter. The Ruby he'd known would have gotten back into her car after his first mean glare. This Ruby who'd just said "prove it" was an older, harder Ruby. It bugged him that he might be the reason for some of that armor.

"Are you going to let me in?" Her voice tried too hard to be loud, mismatched to her personality just like the scarf the wind kept flapping up off her neck.

"Do I have to?" The comeback sounded childish. Stupid, given that getting her here was what he'd wanted in the first place. He'd thought she was the only one who could get him out of this. Now that she stood in front of him, most of him hated the idea.

Ruby stared at him, one eyebrow scrunched down in thought—the way she used to stare at a math problem. It had been one of his favorite things, watching Ruby's mind whir into gear, but the fact that she was now trying to solve him sent an itchy feeling down his spine.

"I forgot something in the car," she said. It had the tone of a convenient excuse, and Luke swallowed the infuriating sense that she recognized his dilemma and was giving him a chance to spare his pride.

Ruby made an exaggerated turn back toward her car. Luke wasn't foolish enough to ignore the out she gave him and hobbled awkwardly back to the couch while she had her back turned. He left the door open. He couldn't decide if he should be glad she'd given him the chance to sit down unseen, or ticked off she'd sensed he needed it. That was always the best and worst thing about Ruby—she could read him like a book.

"You always wanted Granny B to let you live here," came her voice as she closed the guesthouse's front door behind her. There was no nostalgia in her tone; she recited it like fact, the way she'd recited the algebra theorems that gave him fits in school.

Luke let his hand lead his numb leg to come up and cross casually over his good knee. She was watching the way his leg moved, and he fought the urge to cover it with the issue of Pro Bull Rider magazine lying on the couch next to him.

Ruby settled herself in the chair opposite him, a file and clipboard balanced on her lap. She sat upright, knees together, elbows close, the way she used to sit with him in study hall back before he'd coaxed her out of her shell. Ruby had always been a much more entertaining equation to solve than algebra.

"This won't work," he challenged again, knowing it made no sense but needing to keep her at a distance until the knots in his gut settled.

“So you said.” Her eyes fell to the cane he’d forgotten to hide in his rush to get “casually” settled on the couch before she came in the door, and he bit back a scowl. She gave him what he was sure was her worst “therapist” glare. “Don’t think I haven’t heard that kind of talk before.”

She’d heard it from him all those times he’d said he’d never be able to learn algebra. The history in the air between them was so thick and painful he could practically reach out and press his hand up against it like a cement wall.

Ruby opened her file folder with an infuriatingly clinical air. “Left leg, nerve root injury close to the spinal cord. Concussion, loss of consciousness at the time of injury. Ongoing symptoms include loss of muscle strength and neuropathy.”

Luke despised the clinical terms they used—why couldn’t they just say that a mean bull threw him against a fence at an event in Montana, knocked him out, and busted up his back. He remembered the ride, but any memory of the grisly fall came from video tape—he only woke up afterward in an ambulance with several panicked people poking and asking urgent questions.

“How would you rate your current level of pain?”

She’d have read every page of his file, so she knew that was a trick question. This new Ruby Sheldon wasn’t playing nice. “Ain’t nothin’,” he drawled, omitting the wink he usually gave the buckle bunnies. Those pretty, love-struck rodeo fans usually cooed and pouted over his collection of bruises and scratches after a show. They’d showed up at the hospital the first two days, then trickled off as the tour moved on.

Her eyes narrowed, and she clicked her pen. “On a scale of one to ten, please.” He had to admit to a shred of surprise that she could produce such a hard shell in his presence. Maybe hate really was more powerful than love, like Dad always said.

“Point-five.”

“Do you have difficulty with any limbs other than the involved leg?”

He sat back against the couch cushions. “I’ve been told all of me works just fine.”

That irritated her—those kinds of lines always did. She stood up and put her hands on her hips.

“Stand up.”

He glared at her. “You know, I believe I’m fine right here.”

Something shot through her eyes, a stubbornness that surprised him. “Stand up. I’m not going to be scared off, so how long this takes is entirely up to you. Let’s try standing for eight seconds. That ought to be a time frame you know well.”

Eight seconds. The length of a qualifying bull ride. Whenever she’d worried about how much risk or pain was involved in bull riding—which had been often—he’d always said, “Honey, I can take anything for eight seconds.” He hadn’t expected her to use their history against him.

Luke Buckton had burned a heap of bridges on his way out of this tiny town, and now it felt as if he was going to have to fight to keep the pile of ashes from rising up and choking him.

* * *

Ruby made herself look straight at Luke as he pulled his long body up off the couch. He was trying hard to hide every single weakness—physical and otherwise—but she wouldn’t allow it. I’m as stubborn as you are, Luke Buckton. And I have just as much riding on this as you do. Lana was right; success with a high profile client like him would bolster business. But right now, Ruby mostly just wanted to show Luke up. Who’s stronger now, cowboy?

She spied a straight-backed chair up against the wall and dragged it to his side. “Hold on to this and put all your weight on your good leg.”

Luke shot her a look, and she suspected he was concocting some remark about all of him being more than good, but he simply grabbed the chair and rocked back on one hip as if leaning against a bar in an Old West saloon.

“Raise your left leg as far as you can and hold it there, please.”

Effort tightened the corners of his cocky smile. He got the injured leg up about as far as his knees, and she noticed a tremor near the top.

“Like the boots?” He pointed toward his expensive-looking cowboy boots. Ruby guessed they cost as much as her used car. “Custom work. Gift from a sponsor.”

“Very nice,” she replied. “Take them off.”

“What?”

“I can hardly see how your ankle rotates if you’ve got it locked up inside all that fine, hand-tooled leather now, can I?”

He frowned. “None of the other gals made me take off my boots.”

Ruby wasn’t backing down. “None of the other therapists,” she emphasized the correction in terms, “got that far before you drove them off.”

There was a long, prickly pause before he said, “I can’t.”

It must have cost him to say that. His bitter tone made her hair stand on edge. He looked like a porcupine, defensive spines sticking out in all directions, warning the world to keep its distance.

Her heart twisted at the anguish she wondered if only she could see. Luke was deeply hurting, but scrambling to keep it hidden. It gave her only one way forward: if she was going to treat him, she’d have to meet his defenses head-on.

But this was Luke. Luke with those eyes and all that history. Ruby made herself hold his gaze despite the monster-sized flip it caused in her stomach. “You can’t what?” she asked as directly as she knew how. Do not back down.

He stared at her for a long moment. “I can’t get ’em on and off without...help.”

The last word stuck, as if he’d had to drag it up from some pit to say it out loud.

Cowboys pulled their boots off every day. Most did it without even thinking, either heel-to-toe or with a fancy little hook-like gizmo set up beside many Texan doorways. Way back, she’d seen Luke do it hundreds of times. Of course, such maneuvers required standing on one leg—something Ruby was pretty sure Luke could no longer do.

Ruby carefully turned the straight chair so that the seat faced forward. If getting him to receive help came in the form of this near standoff just to remove his boots, then this was as good a place as any to start.

Grace. Was she strong enough to extend grace to the man who had hurt her so deeply back then? The moment suddenly struck her as equally important to her as it was to him. If she claimed to come as far as she had from the teenager Luke had left behind, the proof would come in what she did next.

Slowly, Ruby kneeled down at the foot of the chair and motioned for Luke to sit. “Well, then, help it is.”

The gesture startled him—she watched the astonishment flash across his features before he hid them behind that famous grin. A deep resolve settled into place under her breastbone, the same resolve that had gotten her through all her therapist schooling with record speed and exemplary grades despite a mountain of obstacles.

She folded her hands in her lap and stared up at him. I’ll sit here for an hour if that’s what it takes, Luke. I expect you know that. I expect that’s why I’m here. So come on, cowboy, what’s it gonna be?

The long, tall body still held an athlete’s lines. The take-on-the-world planes of his shoulders, the try-and-stop-me set of his jaw. And yet, despite his strength and determination, all his features seemed to tip on the knife’s edge of a man in doubt. Ruby found herself doing what she’d never thought she’d do again: praying for Luke Buckton.

Slowly—excruciatingly slowly and with all the ferocity of a bull fixing to charge—Luke sat down.

[Chapter Three](#)

Ruby drove a bit down the road before she eased her little car to the shoulder. She let out the breath she'd been holding since pulling the guesthouse door shut behind her and allowed her head to sink against the steering wheel.

The longest hour of my life.

Once Luke sat down, Ruby had expected things to smooth out. Having broken down the barrier and earned that one shred of compliance, she'd expected to gain more.

She'd forgotten who she was dealing with.

Oh, she'd gotten the boot off all right—albeit with a comical sequence of yanks and tugs—to expose the injured foot. When she asked him to use that foot, to show her his range of motion with the ankle or anything else, Luke turned mean. His frustration nearly darkened the room, it was so intense.

Luke had always had a temper—it was probably half of what made him such a good rider. Something came over him when he got angry, a laser-sharp focus and determination that plowed through anything standing in his way. He'd spent most of his teenage years angry, primarily at his father, and that anger had driven him not just to succeed but to excel. Now that anger was directed at his own body, which made it much more vicious as it spilled out onto anyone foolish enough to be in range. Lord, Ruby sent up a moan of a prayer, he's a wounded animal—twice as mean and four times as dangerous.

It wasn't as if Ruby didn't know how to handle an ornery patient. Difficult patients were, in fact, a specialty of hers. Lana said, "Your greatest talent is seeing through the hard actions to the wounded soul beneath." When Lana grafted Ruby into her agency, setting up Martins Gap Physical Therapy as an affiliated partnership of Lana's own practice in Austin, she'd said it was because of Ruby's gifts. "You always find the one gesture that will open up a crack in the walls patients build around themselves." Ruby could always find a crack and pry it open.

Today that gift felt more like a curse. The true torment of the last hour wasn't Luke's behavior—that was just a coping mechanism, the battle weapon of a man at the end of his rope.

No, her real problem was her ability to see through him. To peer under the gleam of the brilliant shell he showed the world and see a man who wasn't sure he could pull off the recovery he needed. A massive cauldron of doubt and pain boiled under that cocky disregard. She'd seen it for just a moment as he sat down, but within minutes of that glimpse he'd slammed the shell back on with the ferocity of the bull bison who wandered the Blue Thorn pastures.

Ruby's cell phone buzzed beside her, and she fished it from her handbag to peer at the screen.

Been praying for you. Call me when it's over.

Lana was the best instructor and mentor Ruby could ever ask for. Mama and Grandpa were supportive, but Lana often knew just how to bolster her spirits. It was probably due to Lana's prayers that Ruby had lasted as long as she had with Luke.

Forgoing a text, Ruby dialed her mentor, taking a deep breath as Lana clicked on the line before the first ring even finished.

"And how was the Buckton beast?"

"Beastly," she replied, glad to feel a damp laugh bubble up from all the tension in her chest.

"Does he look like you remember?"

"Oh, his looks have improved with age. Those eyes are still...those eyes. I'd forgotten how dark they could turn. That man's angry glare could set a tree on fire."

"That charming, huh?"

"Let's just say I'm not so sure the Blue Thorn bulls have the worst temper on that ranch. If he's the charmer of the bull riding circuit, I didn't see any of it."

"A mean son of gun, hmm?"

Ruby let her head fall back against the seat rest. "He was mean—but not in the way you might think. He didn't yell at me or call me names. His methods were more cold. Heartless. Wisecracking and dismissive."

“Ouch. How are you?”

Ruby looked back at the Blue Thorn’s rolling pastures that filled her rearview mirror. “I don’t know. I mean, I knew it’d be hard. But it was so much harder than hard—if that makes any sense. It felt more like sixty hours than sixty minutes.”

“Did you get him to do anything?”

In fact, she had. That was the one foothold she had in this mess, and no one could grab hold of an ounce of progress better than Ruby Sheldon. “Two exercises. And I tricked him into showing me his range of motion, which isn’t much at all. He thinks he’ll be back on a bull, that’s clear.”

“Will he? What sense do you get about his prognosis?”

“I have no way of knowing. At least not yet. If anybody could pull it off though, it’d be him.”

“Only...” Lana had caught the hesitation in her voice.

Ruby let one hand rest on the file. She’d have to write down her notes from the visit, and that would feel so very odd. It’d be a challenge to think of Luke Buckton in purely clinical terms. “You know how this goes. It may not be up to him.”

“Do you feel like it’s up to you?”

“No. Yes. Honestly, I don’t know. Even the best therapy program we have, followed to the letter, can only do so much.” Lana was the seasoned professional, but Ruby had seen patients throw themselves wholeheartedly into therapy and then progress both more and less than anyone expected—and it wasn’t always clear why. “I suppose it’s up to God more than anything else.”

She could hear Lana sigh on her end. She’d told her mentor the entire history she and Luke had together. “Ruby, I know I told you he could be a high-profile client for you, but is it worth it? You don’t owe this man anything. I’m sure he could pay anybody to come from Austin and take his bad attitude three times a week for thirty minutes.”

“I’m not so sure he can, Lana.”

“Don’t those guys earn big bucks? I read the guy who won last year’s championships was worth millions.”

“In the big series, yes. Luke’s not quite there yet. Besides, you don’t earn if you can’t ride, and Luke’s been out of commission since June. His sponsors may have all pulled out already. I don’t think he’d be back on the Blue Thorn unless it was his only option. Luke wasn’t coming home until he came home a champion, you know?”

“Don’t start making excuses for him. You told me you spent months crying over that man.”

Ruby closed her eyes. “I did. But I’m not that girl anymore, either.”

“And you just proved that. You could walk away from this right now and I would back you up.”

“I don’t quit on patients.”

“Luke Buckton isn’t ‘a patient.’ He’s an emotional minefield. Hearing the way you sound right now, I’m sorry I ever encouraged you to take him on. This can’t end well—for you or for him. You’ve got way too much water under the bridge.”

Lana was right. Their history did make things worse. “I know, Lana, but maybe it’s time to burn that bridge. After all, if I can get through Luke Buckton’s treatment, then I’ll know for sure I’ll never quit on a patient.”

“All right, I told myself I wasn’t going to ask this, but I have to know. You don’t still carry a torch for him, do you?”

The most startling thing about today had been the tiny, irrational part of her that did still care. The flicker of against-her-will compassion that made her walk to the car for a “forgotten” file just to save his dignity. It stunned her how, after all the ways he’d hurt her, her heart could resurrect any care at all.

“He needs grace.” It was true, but even she knew it wasn’t the whole truth.

“Perhaps,” Lana sighed. “But maybe it doesn’t need to come from you.”

Ruby looked back at the ranch in her rearview mirror. “Maybe I need to know I’m strong enough to show him grace. Maybe I need the closure I never got. Maybe I want the chance to walk away from Luke in a way that showed more mercy than the way he walked away from me.”

“I just want to be sure you’re taking him on for the right reasons. Professional concern isn’t the same thing as nostalgic sympathy.”

Sympathy was the last thing Luke wanted, or needed. That man needed someone to wage war on his condition, maybe even to wage war on the man himself.

If Ruby Sheldon was anything, she was a warrior.

* * *

Luke eased himself up off the hay bale as he watched his brother, Gunner, check some records in the barn after lunch. Nobody had yet said a word about Ruby’s visit—not even Gran, who he’d expected to cross the lawn the minute Ruby’s car was out of sight and grill him for details.

Lunch was an excruciating exercise in avoiding the topic. Gran, Gunner, Gunner’s wife of two years, Brooke, Brooke’s ten-year-old daughter, Audie, and even their seven-month-old boy, Trey, seemed to stare holes in him while talking about every other subject they could find. Good. Everyone ought to know the subject of Ruby Sheldon was off-limits. Still, Luke wondered how long that reprieve would last.

He balanced his weight on the good leg until he knew how well the bad one was working at the moment—an annoyingly necessary tactic these days—and leaned up against the barn wall as casually as possible. It was always an endless negotiation to be upright. How long would it be before he threw his leg over the back of a motorcycle without a second thought again? Over the back of a horse? A bull? He’d pressed both his surgeons in Montana, as well as the specialist he’d seen in Austin, but no one had any timelines to give.

Go ahead, ask me. Gunner could never leave well enough alone where he was involved, and after Ruby’s visit Luke was itching for a fight anyhow. He’d thought he’d appreciate the quiet of the ranch, but the truth was the inactivity was making him nuts. The guesthouse—the whole ranch—was too quiet, too slow, too watchful. One of his motorcycles was still in the ranch garage, and if he thought he stood half a chance of driving it with any control, he’d be off down the road in a heartbeat.

Gunner looked up to catch Luke’s stare. “I suppose it’s none of my business,” his brother said, replying to the question Luke hadn’t asked.

“It isn’t. But you’re gonna ask anyway, so go ahead.”

“Why are you being such an idiot?”

Luke was expecting a more specific question, but wasn’t it just like Gunner to paint his entire life in idiotic terms instead of just his attitude toward Ruby? It stumped him for a reply—Luke wasn’t sure where to start.

Gunner, evidently, knew exactly where to start. He straightened up, making Luke resent every one of the three inches Gunner had on him. “I thought Ruby showed a lot of spine coming out here after the way you’ve been behaving. Tell me, is it all an act, or are you really just that mean now?”

“I can’t stand any of that stupid ‘stretch this way’ and ‘push against here’ nonsense.”

Gunner returned his gaze to the papers. “So you’ve got this all figured out then. You’ll just heal on your own and be back to break new bones next season.” Gunner looked so much like their father it made Luke want to kick something. As if he could. It had been so hard to get his boot back on after Ruby left that the frustration was eating him alive.

“It’s worked before.” Luke crossed his arms over his chest. “Come on, this isn’t the first time I’ve come up hurt.” It wasn’t. But it was the first time he had come up hurt this bad.

“No,” Gunner replied as he closed the ledger and shoved it back into a drawer. “But forgive me for pointing out this is the first time you’ve come home.”

Luke's teeth ground at Gunner's words. That was just like his big brother to cut right to the marrow without mercy. Luke fished for a good comeback, and came up empty. Instead he found a nail in the wall beside him and began to wiggle it loose.

"I know you." Gunner went on. "I've been you. You wouldn't be here if it weren't your last chance."

"This is not my last chance," Luke shot back as he yanked the nail from the wall. He glared at Gunner's lousy, end-of-the-road choice of words. "I figured it was time to show up, that's all."

"That's a load of bull, and you know it." Gunner met his glare with one of his own. "How about you just stop pretending this isn't a major setback?"

"It's not a major setback." Now he was really starting to sound like a five-year-old. Go ahead, Gunner, don't hold back. Go for 'career-ending' why don't you? You won't be the first, and right now I'd love a reason to punch you. He threw the nail into a nearby barrel and found another one to work loose.

Gunner grabbed his hand on the nail and gripped it tight to hold it still. "Don't you get it, Luke? No one here cares whether or not you ride next season. Whether you win the tour next season or world championship the season after that or never get on a bull again. This is your family. You don't have to go all 'big shot' on us. You surely didn't have to go all 'big shot' on Ruby or anyone else."

"Nobody needs to baby me!" Luke yanked his hand out from under Gunner's, the nail underneath leaving a small scrape on his palm. He shook his hand and then sucked on the wound while turning to head out the barn door. Every inch of him wanted to storm out, but his slow gait made it impossible.

"More bull. You're hurt. Bad, if I had to guess—and I have to guess, don't I? Because you're not saying anything." Gunner walked up and stood right in front of him now, his softened expression even worse than his previous glare. "Luke," he said, in lower tones, glancing back toward the big house as if keeping his words away from prying ears, "just how bad are you hurt? Really?"

"Nothin' to tell," Luke dodged, shrugging.

"I don't buy that for a minute. Talk to me. It's eating you alive, man, even I can see it."

His brother's words started up a war in Luke's chest—the need to talk waging battle with the need to keep everyone from knowing. His surgeons and even the local doc had been sworn to secrecy. His agent didn't know the whole of it. If even a hint of this ever made it back to his sponsors...

"Don't know," he said finally, feeling rattled by even letting that much slip out.

"Of course you know."

"No, I mean I really don't know. Nobody does. It's not pain. I'd be better if it were just pain. It's..." He'd kept it bottled up for long enough that it fairly boiled inside him, desperate to get out. "I don't feel anything. The nerves—they're shot. At least for now. And nobody knows if they'll stay that way."

Gunner was wrong. It didn't help to tell someone. It felt as if saying it aloud let the facts take root in the real world instead of just infesting his worries. The weight of not knowing felt heavier than ever.

Luke took a step toward his brother, hating how much effort the action involved. "So all the stupid therapies in the world can't change the fact that I may have fried my leg, get it?" He hissed the words like the threat they were. "Either the feeling's coming back or it ain't. I've got no say in how this ends. None." He jabbed an angry finger at Gunner and his infuriatingly compassionate expression. "So forgive me if I'm not a ball of sunshine about the whole thing. I need to beat this. I need to get my leg back. I need to show the whole tour that I am not washed-out for good."

"Luke..."

"Don't!" Luke shot back. "Don't you dare give me that 'don't give up hope look.' I can't take that from you. Or from Ruby, or from anybody." He started making his way back to the guesthouse, needing to get out of the open space where anybody could watch him limp. A thought turned him

around—why did it always take so much effort to turn around?—and he gave Gunner the darkest look he could manage. “Not one word to Gran. Or Ellie. Or anyone. Understand?”

Gunner held up his hands. “I get it. They ought to know, but if you don’t want...”

“Not one word,” Luke repeated, turning back toward the house.

Gunner’s voice came after him. “Ruby knows. She’s got your file, so she knows, doesn’t she?”

Luke just kept walking.

Chapter Four

“You came back.”

Ruby couldn’t read the look on Luke’s face Wednesday morning as he opened the guesthouse door. Was he surprised, pleased or irritated? Likely all of the above, she decided. “Yes, I am. Surprised?”

At least he’d met her at the door, not just left it open as if she were some stray animal allowed to wander in. It was easier this time—she’d survived the initial shock of seeing him. She’d always wondered what it would feel like to see him again, and now she knew. He had less power over her composure now. Oh, he could still set her stomach tumbling with one look—a gal would have to be dead not to feel something when those brilliant blues met hers—but the tumble was something other than attraction now. Nostalgia? Regret? Pity?

Whatever it was, Ruby knew it wasn’t anger. Determination, maybe, but not anger. “Clock’s a ticking, cowboy. Are you going to let me in or are we going to chitchat in your doorway?”

Luke scratched his chin. “Yes, ma’am.” Clearly he wasn’t expecting the “all business” version of Ruby today. He gestured her inside, but stood where he was so she had to sidestep close to him to gain entrance. Classic Luke, Ruby thought as she set down her bag. Always going for the swoon.

Well, today was business. She pointed to Luke’s sneakers. “I see you took my suggestion.” She’d shown him grace and compassion on her last visit, because he deserved it. He’d admitted a weakness to her in the business about the boots, and she knew how hard that was for him. Today, she’d make him work, and she hoped her request for athletic footwear gave him a hint of what to expect.

“I do know how to cooperate,” he teased, flashing a smile.

“Is that so? Give me thirty minutes before I agree, will you?” She found the chair he’d sat on last week and moved it to the center of the floor. “Have a seat.”

Last time, it had taken Luke almost a full minute to acquiesce and sit down. Ruby had no intention of letting it turn into a battle of wills this time. Instead, she dropped her bag to the floor as if this were no big deal, sat down at the foot of the chair the way she had before, and began pulling equipment out of her bag. She didn’t even look up at Luke. Instead, she adopted an air of expected compliance, fiddling and arranging her equipment until he settled himself uneasily in the chair in front of her. See now, that wasn’t so hard for either of us.

Ruby positioned his feet. “Raise your toes, one foot at a time.”

He scoffed. “I figured we’d start with something a bit harder than toe touches.”

“Ankle flexing,” she corrected, “and you’ll get the hard stuff when you’ve earned it. Plus, you have to answer questions while you do them.” She placed her hand a few inches above Luke’s feet, giving him a target. He easily tapped her palm with his right toes, but struggled to hit her palm with his left. “Any tingling or burning sensations in the morning?”

“No,” he replied. “Are you married?”

Startled, she looked up at him. “What?”

“You get a question, so I get a question. Fair’s fair.”

Ruby sat back. “That’s not how this goes.” She returned her hand to above his feet. “Again, please, five times each.”

Luke began the exercises, but launched a running commentary as he did so. “I’m guessing no, on account of I’d probably have heard about it if you were. And your name’s still Sheldon.”

“Lots of women keep their names when they marry these days, Luke.” She noticed his left foot was raising lower and lower with each attempt. Numbness aside, Luke had lost a lot of muscle strength.

“Maybe, but not you. You’d be Mrs. Whoever. So there is no Mr. Whoever, is there?”

Ruby grabbed Luke’s ankles and gently tugged them toward her. It was time to let Luke know she wasn’t putting up with any antics. She could throw him off balance—literally—anytime she chose to do so.

“Whoa,” he yelped as he gripped the chair to keep upright. “A little warning, if you don’t mind.”

“A little courtesy, if you don’t mind. Toes in and out, making a V, ten times. Count them out, so you won’t be tempted to flap your jaw.”

With just a touch of repentant rascal in his eyes, Luke complied. When he finished, she offered, “I’m single. And fine with it, I might add, not that you’d understand.”

“Hey, I’m single too, you know.”

“Single with a long line of buckle bunnies trailing after you, which isn’t the same thing.” Ruby moved to kneel beside his good leg. “Raise your foot out in front of you, knee-high, ten times,” and when he opened his mouth to make some smart-aleck comeback she added, “Counting out loud.”

Luke settled back in his chair, giving her a look Ruby presumed Gran was sick of by now. “One...two... I’m generous with my time to fans...three...four...no harm in that.”

“So I’ve heard. Not that I follow your career closely.” She had tried to keep from following Luke’s career at all, but in Martins Gap that was easier said than done. People never spoke directly to her about it, given their history, but it wasn’t hard to see a clipping posted on the bulletin board at Lolly’s Diner or hear neighbors boast at Shorty’s Pizza. The whole church had prayed for him when word of the accident hit town.

“Eight... I got enough get-well cards...nine...to wallpaper the guesthouse three times over.” While that had the air of exaggeration she’d expect from Luke Buckton, she didn’t doubt that the cards had poured in after his injury. Even Ruby knew, however, that the “Will Buckton return?” speculation in sports media had dropped off the minute the battle between the next two tour contenders heated up. The spotlight lost no time in moving on, and a man like Luke thrived on attention. What happened when you took that away at his most vulnerable moment?

“Now the other leg, only five on this one.”

Luke couldn’t go as high as his good leg, but he dug in and raised it ten times to match the other instead of the five she’d assigned. “That stubborn streak of yours will serve you well, but when I say five, I mean five. Not ten. You can’t overdo this if you want those nerves to wake up.”

“When those nerves wake up.”

Ruby wasn’t in the business of lying to patients, even with the kindest of lies. “If those nerves wake up.” When he glared at her, she added, “So let’s do our best to make sure they do.”

He was quiet for the next exercise, and downright silent when his leg refused to comply for the following one.

“So have there been any potential Mr. Whoevers?” he leaned in and asked.

Ruby knew a diversion when she saw one. She shifted to a less taxing exercise and said, “As a matter of fact, there have. Not that I’d name names with the likes of you.”

“Gran told me you dated an insurance salesman from Waco for a time. An insurance salesman.” He coated the last three words with generous disdain.

Ruby slapped her file shut. “If you already knew the details of my social life, why’d you ask?” She pointed to his leg, an unspoken command to do the current exercise again.

“I wanted to hear it from you.”

“You wanted to gloat over my small-town choice of beaus, you mean.”

He grinned. “Well, that, too.”

“Okay then, let’s hear about your relationships. The serious ones. Lasting more than two nights or one town.”

Luke stretched his leg toward her extended hand, his voice tightening with the effort. “Don’t do those.”

“You mean don’t do those anymore.” The jab left her mouth before she could catch it back. He’d been “serious” with her and they both knew it.

It stopped Luke in his tracks, his leg dropping to the floor. “I suppose I deserved that,” he said after a long pause. “So we’re gonna talk about it, then?”

“No,” Ruby shot back.

* * *

Should they talk about it? Luke knew full well the danger of opening up that can of worms. He’d loved her—as much as a seventeen-year-old boy could love anyone. He’d bucked all the put-downs from the other guys on the football team about dating “the brainiac” instead of this year’s collection of cheerleaders.

If he and Ruby started talking about it, he’d wind up needing to apologize, and he wasn’t ready for that. Of course, he knew he’d broken her heart. But he didn’t believe he’d made the wrong decision. She wasn’t rodeo material. Even if he had taken her with him, the circuit would have eaten her alive. The press liked him much better with a rotation of pretty things hanging on each arm. According to Nolan Riggs, his agent, Luke’s good looks were an asset, and “...and he’s single, ladies!” was as much a part of his marketing as how much the camera loved his Buckton-blue eyes.

“Okay,” he said as he took the small plastic ball she’d told him to roll under his bad foot, “so we’re not gonna talk about it. Check.”

“Can you do that?” she asked. “Can you be decent and professional about this? Because if you can’t, we’re done right now.”

He searched for a safer topic. “What was college like?” He knew she’d gotten into some fancy-pants accelerated program for physical therapy that got her out in fewer years.

“I liked it. It was fun living in Austin for a while.” She pulled out some brightly colored elastic bands, wiggling her fingers through them while she decided which to use. She always did that—wiggle her fingers while she was thinking. He’d forgotten how amusing he found it.

“But you didn’t stay?”

She looked up at him. “I couldn’t.” She paused for a moment before she explained. “Dad.”

How could it have slipped his mind that her father had died when they were a few years out of high school? Gran had told him. He’d sent a card or something, hadn’t he? His schedule hadn’t allowed for anything like traveling home for a friend’s dad’s funeral. Especially when he’d been certain she wouldn’t want him anywhere near her. “I knew about that. Sorry. Really.”

She and her dad had been close. He remembered that. He’d been envious of it, as a matter of fact, given how bad things were between himself and his own father. Ruby simply nodded, and he watched her tuck her grief down inside a professional demeanor. She took back the little ball and looped a blue band around his outstretched feet. “Pull your knees apart from each other, slowly, ten times.”

He did as she requested. It wasn’t the time for some wisecrack; obviously her dad was still a tender topic. “How’s your mom? Your grandpa?”

She relaxed somewhat. “Grandpa’s had a rough year. He lives with Mama now. I help out as much as I can. It’s why I’m so thankful to have the practice here, where I can be nearby.”

He hadn’t ever figured her for the kind to strike out on her own. “How’d you open your own practice?”

Ruby spoke as he went through the exercise. “My course instructor, Lana, used to work for a firm down in Austin. When it got bought out by one of the bigger firms—that happens a lot these days—she got tired of the atmosphere and offered to set up a partnership with me.”

He hadn't seen this Lana nor had anyone referred him to her. "Is she here in Martins Gap now?"

"Of course not. She's got her own clientele back in Austin. I'm the satellite office. But she comes out once a week." Ruby looked up, a peculiar squint to her eyes. "We collaborate on our more difficult patients."

"So I'll meet her, then." It pleased the rascal side of him to be thought of as a "more difficult patient."

"Not if I can help it." She slipped the band off his knees and motioned for him to go back to the silly toe touches. "I owe Lana a great deal. I'd like to spare her your particular brand of charm if possible."

Luke stared at her. This new Ruby had a spine he'd never seen before. Soft as a kitten? Not Ruby Sheldon. Not anymore. As a matter of fact, he couldn't entirely say this cat didn't have claws. Maybe it was better if they didn't talk about their past.

"You like what you do? I mean, you can make a living at it, even out here?"

"I get a lot of hours at the medical center, and I do some home health care for seniors like Grandpa to fill in the gaps. I'm not rich like some rodeo stars," she grasped his foot and pushed it toward him, stretching out the tendon. "But I do okay. Between the two of us—Lana in Austin and me out here—we're able make it work. I had Dad's life insurance policy to help me get set up. Mama figured Dad would have wanted it that way. 'Course, that was before Grandpa got really sick."

"I'm not rolling in dough, just in case you were wondering." He didn't know why he said that. "Not yet, that is."

Ruby stopped moving his foot. "I figured. You wouldn't be here if you had any other options."

Ouch. "I have options. I just wanted some quiet."

That made her laugh. "I have never known you to crave quiet in your entire life."

"Well, maybe I've changed since we..." He'd started a sentence that wasn't safe to finish.

"I certainly hope you've changed since you left me behind." She gave the last three words a bitter edge.

Double ouch. "So I guess we are gonna talk about it."

"No." She pushed against his foot, harder this time, and he waited—in vain—for it to hurt. "We're not."

[Chapter Five](#)

Luke sat in his pickup in the Red Boots BBQ parking lot and watched for Ruby's dinky little car to come up the road. They'd been through two more therapy sessions—very boring, tedious therapy session where she always seemed to know if he overdid his exercises. He was glad she gave him the Fourth of July weekend off, but even now he was itching to do something other than "push, pull, stretch, bend and balance" with her.

When he'd left the phone message, he wasn't quite sure she'd agree to meet him for lunch. Red Boots was a bit out of town, but the food was good and he wasn't really ready to be seen in Martins Gap with all its peering eyes. He stood a good chance of being recognized even here, but it was the best option he could think of when Nolan called Friday and said he was coming into town today.

So now you're too chicken to meet your agent by yourself? Luke shifted in his seat, fidgety with the unfamiliar anxiety. The old Luke Buckton was fearless, and he hated this new, nervous side of him.

You want her opinion, he corrected himself. You need her cooperation for your plan. If she hears it from Nolan, she'll take to it easier.

Luke checked his watch. 11:25 a.m. Ruby was never late for anything. Luke, on the other hand, was always late for everything. Her eyes would pop out of her head to see him here a full five minutes ahead of time. Yeah, well lots of things about me have changed, he laughed to himself. He'd told Nolan to show up at noon so he'd have a chance to give Ruby a heads-up on the whole deal.

And to head Nolan off at the pass if Ruby threw a fit, which was a distinct possibility given what he was about to propose. Time for a bit of that fearlessness, cowboy.

Luke got out of his truck just as the sign in the Red Boots window flickered on to Open and Ruby's car swerved into the parking lot.

She looked him up and down as he walked over to her. He'd dressed sharp today, wanting to look on top of his game. If he didn't feel it, at least he could look it.

"No cane?" she asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Flying solo today. Long as you don't ask to hit the dance floor, I'll be fine." Luke gestured toward the entrance.

"But you're staying out of the hometown spotlight?" she replied as she began walking toward the door, a giant red wooden slab below a neon sign of a kicking boot. The establishment was about twenty minutes outside of Martins Gap.

"I like their food here." He kept his voice casual as he picked his way across the gravel parking lot with care.

"You like how far out of Martins Gap that food is." That was Ruby. It was always impossible to get anything past her.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," he admitted as he grabbed the big handle and heaved the heavy door open for her. The action required more effort than he remembered. If his old weight set was still in the ranch house basement, he ought to set it up in the guesthouse. The therapy was only focusing on his legs—he shouldn't let the rest of his body lose its training. "This isn't exactly standard treatment protocol."

"Getting you up and out of the house is a good thing. And I get not wanting to do it in front of an audience." She paused for a moment before adding, "But I did think about it before I called you back, if you want to know the truth."

That was Ruby—thoughtful to his impulsiveness. Dependable in all the ways he wasn't. Mostly invisible compared to his relentless "look at me." He told himself Nolan had been right all those years ago—she never would have been happy on the tour. "I want us to be friends," he ventured, meaning it but understanding the surprised look it drew from her. "Think we can do that?"

She narrowed one eye at him, that analytical look that always used to bug him so. "I don't know."

"But you're here." That had to count for something.

"Am I here as your therapist, your friend or the girl you used to date in high school?"

She wasn't the girl he used to date in high school anymore. She was older, tougher, probably wiser, but also a bit of something else he couldn't quite put a name to just yet. He'd be lying if he said that last part didn't make him curious. "The first two." Luke stuffed one hand in his pocket as he took off his hat, unsure if that was the right answer. "Table for three, please," he said to the girl who greeted them.

"Three?" Ruby didn't look pleased at the surprise.

"My agent's coming later to talk over something. I want to hear what you think—as a therapist and a friend—before I say yes."

She stopped following the server to glare at him. "No games, Luke."

"No games. I want Nolan to hear what you have to say and I want you to hear what Nolan has to say." He pulled the chair out for her at the table. "Straight up and simple."

She sat down, a wary look on her face. "You don't do straight up and simple."

"Let's just say I'm trying a new tactic these days." He sat himself down, grateful he didn't have to maneuver his leg into a booth. Getting in wasn't so bad, but getting out could prove a gangly hassle he wasn't ready to attempt. "I did my exercises over the holiday weekend anyway, you know."

She offered him the first smile he'd seen since arriving. "Well, this is a new Luke. I hadn't pegged you for compliance."

He grimaced. "I don't take much to that word. Willing to work at it, maybe."

“Cooperative, then.”

“Easygoing,” he suggested as the server brought over tall glasses of water.

“That might be pushing it. An easygoing person would have warned me I was having lunch with your agent instead of springing it on me after I’d arrived.”

Luke felt himself grin. When was the last time he’d done that? There was always something about Ruby, a gift she had for putting him at ease when his ambition got the better of him.

The tour might have eaten Ruby alive, but right now he couldn’t rightly say the tour hadn’t eaten him alive without her. Riding a bull was a binary science: either you were on the bull, or you were off it. Either you rode, or you didn’t. The clean-cut nature of that world appealed to him. It was one of the reasons all this “maybe” guesswork and “let’s see how things progress” prognosis drove him crazy.

“How have things with this Nolan fellow been since the accident?”

Well, there was a loaded question. Luke fiddled with a packet of crackers from the bread basket. “Fine.”

“A ‘that’s what I tell the public’ fine or truly fine?”

“If I’m not earning, Nolan’s not earning from me. Does that answer your question?” Though the agent had a whole lineup of athletes he represented, Luke used to be one of Nolan’s top clients, getting a hefty portion of the man’s focused attention. Nolan used to return his phone calls within the hour. Now his phone calls got returned by the end of the day if he was fortunate. Friday’s phone call had been the first one Nolan had initiated in a month. He wasn’t going to share that little detail with Ruby, however. Instead, he opted for, “There’s a lot riding on whether I ride.”

“So Nolan wants you riding again as fast as possible, I take it?”

“Whether or not it’s what Nolan wants, it’s what I want.” Luke looked around the restaurant, just starting to fill for the lunch rush. “I’m going crazy sitting around.”

The server took their orders. Ruby had some safe salad thing while Luke opted for the Diablo Double super spicy BBQ sandwich. Home cooking was good, but Gran needed to learn how to use hot sauce the way it was meant to be used—generously.

“I thought you were doing your exercises. I wouldn’t call that sitting around.” She accepted her iced tea, and a basket of biscuits found its way to the center of the table.

“Okay, I’m standing at my kitchen counter, marching and balancing on one leg. I’m used to a bit more excitement than that.”

Ruby was quiet for a moment, and then gave Luke a direct look. “I think I’d like to hear from you first what it is Nolan is going to try to convince me to do.”

“Nolan’s not going to try to convince you to do anything.”

“Please,” she replied, giving Luke a dubious look. “Give me a bit more credit than that. You think I’ll take whatever scheme is in the works more seriously if I hear it from Nolan instead of from you. Mostly because you know I’m familiar with your gift for schemes. How about you just tell me? ‘Straight up’ as you say.”

* * *

Ruby held Luke’s gaze. Clearly Luke was up to something. That man got a gleam in his eye anyone could see a mile off when he thought he was about to get away with something.

He was trying to play it straight, she thought. Ruby just wasn’t sure he was capable of such a thing. Then again, he’d admitted the accident had changed him. Maybe she should give him the benefit of the doubt. It was one of the reasons she’d asked him to tell her now—she wanted to hear his version of whatever was up.

Ruby could see him decide. She was changing his game plan, and she could literally see his brain sort through the merit of her request. You’re so used to being in control, she thought as she watched his jaw work. How does it feel to have your future in God’s hands instead of your tightfisted grasp?

“Okay,” he said slowly. She could hear his gears turning in the tone of his answer. “So you know my accident was big news.”

There was an “of course” in his attitude that reminded her what a monster of an ego he had. But he also wasn’t all wrong about his visibility—the photos and videos of a limp and unconscious Luke Buckton being carried from the arena had been headline footage all over Texas.

“Well, Nolan—and folks at Pro Bull Rider magazine, it turns out—think my recovery and comeback could be just as big news. It would also keep me in the public eye until I get back up and riding.”

Ruby knew Luke saw that issue in terms of when and until and not if, but it struck her doubly hard right now. The fire in Luke’s eyes told her the man wasn’t entertaining even the slightest notion that he wouldn’t return to the arena. That was a double-edged sword; determination could take a patient places medicine couldn’t go, but a stubborn refusal to accept limitations could make someone overpush in a way that could be equally dangerous.

“Meaning?” She had a pretty good idea where this was going, but wanted to hear it from Luke.

“The magazine wants to do a piece on my recovery. A couple of pieces, actually. Documenting how I heal and train. If I give them exclusive access, it could be a pretty sweet deal.”

Ruby pictured photographers nosing in on therapy sessions while some stunning blonde reporter hung on Luke’s every word. None of it sounded like conditions she’d want to work in, much less on a case as demanding as Luke’s.

“Think of it,” Luke went on. “Cameras on hand to capture my first run, my first ride...”

“Your tenth fall,” she cut in. “This kind of recovery doesn’t go in a straight line, Luke. You’re going to have setbacks. Are you sure you want an audience for that?”

“Everybody loves a comeback story. And you know me—I work best with an audience. And a finish line to strive toward.”

Ruby felt her appetite leave the building. She pushed away the salad that had arrived moments earlier. “What do you have in mind for that finish line?”

“An exhibition ride.”

“A ride? On a bull?”

“Well, not the meanest bull around, but one with—”

“Absolutely not.” She started to push her chair away. “How can you even think I’d agree to something so...so...” She couldn’t come up with a word for how reckless and foolhardy an idea this was.

“It’s dramatic, I grant you, but I’ve got to—”

“No, it’s not dramatic. It’s irresponsible. You’ve been seriously hurt. We don’t know the full extent of the nerve damage you’ve suffered, and there’s no set timeline for recovery. All your publicity ideas mean that ride has to be scheduled in advance. How can you make a promise we might not be able to keep? Guarantee you’ll be ready in time? You can’t just cowboy up and grit your teeth past this, Luke.”

“Sure I can. I’ll compensate for whatever I don’t have. You’ll teach me.”

Ruby stood up. “I can’t teach you split-second reactions if you’ve got no sensation.”

“Whoa, lower your voice,” Luke hissed, pulling her back down. “Don’t say that kind of stuff where people can hear you, okay?”

Ruby made herself sit down and look him in the eye. Maybe she could get him to see reason before this doomed stunt went any further. “Don’t say what’s wrong with you? Don’t tell you what you refuse to hear? You expect me to not only stand by and watch you potentially get yourself killed, but you want me to play guest star? Ruby Sheldon, therapist to the late, great Luke Buckton? Because trust me, Luke, that’s what it’ll be. You cannot do this.”

“I can’t just disappear, either.” Luke ran a hand through his hair. “Look, Ruby, I told you how this works. No ride, no pay, no rankings. There are no sick days, no medical leave here. If the fans can’t see me, they’ll forget who I am. That’s why this could be such a great chance. Think about it: this magazine’s paying to watch me heal. What better incentive could a guy get?”

It had to be said. “And what if you don’t heal? Will they want their money back?”

“I’ll heal, Ruby. You know I will. You wouldn’t have signed on if you didn’t think I could do it.”

Ruby hated that there was a grain of truth to that. Luke Buckton had made a career of beating the odds. Part of the shock of his injury came from the fact that before the incident, he’d been able to rise up from spectacular falls and ignore seemingly serious injuries. He’d once wrapped an injured arm in tape and ridden through an event only to have it leaked later that that arm had been broken in two places. If common sense ruled the day, he shouldn’t even be standing up, much less contemplating an all-star comeback.

Luke leaned in. “Look me in the eye right now and tell me it’s impossible. Tell me I don’t stand a chance.”

It was just like Luke to find the one inch of plausibility and stretch it into a mile. It was highly unlikely that he’d make a full, flawless recovery—it was foolish beyond reason to bring the media into it—but she couldn’t sit there and tell him it was impossible, much as she wanted to.

“You stand a very small chance. Minute.”

He leaned back, victorious. “Itty-bitty’s all I need. You know that.”

“But if you push yourself too hard and too fast then you stand a much larger chance of doing yourself serious harm. The you-won’t-get-up-and-walk-away-from-it kind of harm. Luke, I don’t see why you have to do this. And with press watching. It’s not worth the risk.”

“Maybe not to you.”

Ruby scrambled for a way to talk him out of this before his agent came and turned it into a hopeless two-against-one. “Explain it to me, then. Make me understand why it’s worth it to you to risk the rest of your life to get a spread on eight pages of a magazine.”

“Ten,” Luke corrected. And she wasn’t really surprised when he added, “Plus the cover.”

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