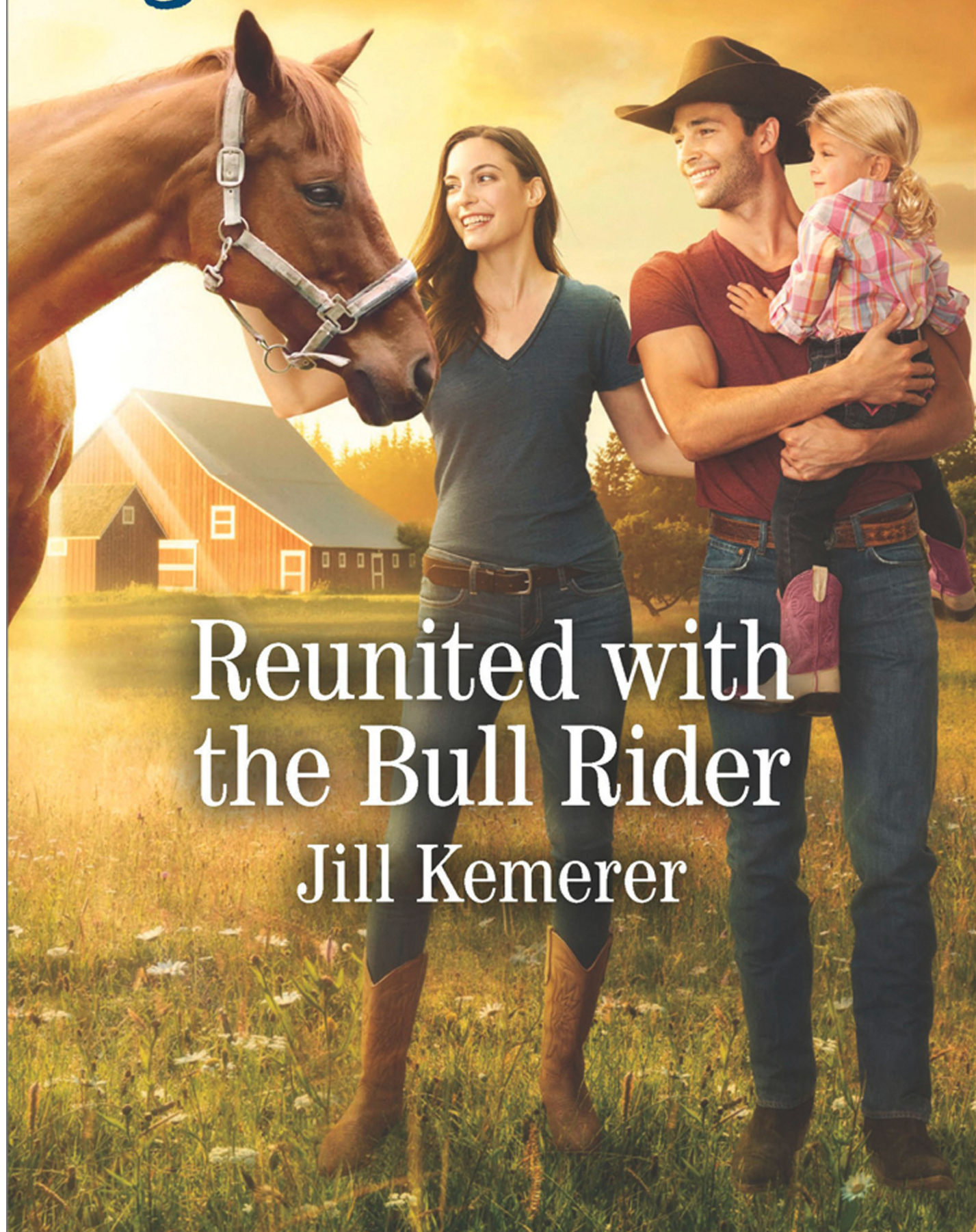


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# Reunited with the Bull Rider

Jill Kemerer

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**Reunited With The Bull Rider**

«HarperCollins»

## **Kemerer J.**

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Goodbye rodeo, hello hometown But is this Wyoming Cowboy ready to face his past? Amy Deerson wanted to mentor a child. Her plan did not include former bull rider Nash Bolton—the little girl's brother and guardian. It's been a decade since Nash left town without a word, breaking Amy's young heart. Now they must put their painful past aside to help fragile, traumatized Ruby. If only getting over their first love were that simple.

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JILL KEMERER writes novels with love, humor and faith. Besides spoiling her mini dachshund and keeping up with her busy kids, Jill reads stacks of books, lives for her morning coffee and gushes over fluffy animals. She resides in Ohio with her husband and two children. Jill loves connecting with readers, so please visit her website, [jillkemerer.com](http://jillkemerer.com), or contact her at PO Box 2802, Whitehouse, OH 43571.

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Reunited with the Bull Rider

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REUNITED WITH THE BULL RIDER

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“You were my best friend.”

Amy’s eyes welled with tears. “I loved you. Cherished you. Thought nothing but the best of you. And then you were gone. You cut me out of your life, and mine became very empty.”

Nash shifted in his seat, his face grave.

She shook away the threatening tears, swallowed the lump in her throat. “I didn’t know what to do with myself.”

He stood, pacing, his movements agitated and robotic. “I hate myself for that.”

“I hated you, too.” She rose also, rubbing her arms, and gazed at the barn in the distance. Maybe she shouldn’t have told him. “I’m not trying to punish you. I just... Well, I needed you to know.”

He came up next to her. She dared not move or she’d fall apart. His shoulder was less than an inch from hers.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Don’t remember. Forget it. Forget it all.

She spun away from him.

“It’s your fault, you know. The life I wanted? Gone. You shattered my dreams, Nash Bolton. You shattered them.”

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

—Isaiah 6:8

[Dear Reader,](#)

Do you ever feel torn between gratitude for the blessings in your life and envy of others who have things you still want? I struggle with this. I can wake up in the morning, praising God for my family, my health and the opportunity to write for a living. Two hours later I’m jealous and grumbling at a Facebook post someone shared. Like Amy at the Easter egg hunt, though, I keep turning back to focus on God’s providence. I try my best to keep a “Send me” spirit to do His will. I fail sometimes, but thankfully, we don’t have to be perfect!

My prayer is for you to walk daily with the Lord and to embrace obedience even when it feels impossible. He loves to bless His children. You never know—He might bless you beyond your wildest dreams!

I love to hear from readers, so please email me at [jill@jillkemerer.com](mailto:jill@jillkemerer.com) or write to PO Box 2802, Whitehouse, Ohio 43571. Bless you!

*Jill Kemerer*

To my sister, Sarah. You’ll always be my hero! And to my brother-in-law, Rich, and my nieces, Eva, Cecilia and Calista. You make life fun!

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[Chapter One](#)

Tonight was no ordinary night, not for Amy Deerson, at least. She was about to meet the little girl she'd been asked to mentor. When the pastor called yesterday, she'd jumped at the opportunity to spend a few afternoons each week with a neglected child. At four years old, the girl was too young for the church-sponsored mentor program, and the pastor had suggested a private arrangement due to the circumstances. But first, Amy needed to meet the girl's father. He had the ultimate say in whether she spent time with his daughter or not.

Taking a deep breath, Amy got out of the car and approached the church's entrance. It was still chilly for late March in Sweet Dreams, Wyoming, but it wouldn't be long before wildflowers bloomed. Just thinking about flowers, crafts, tea parties and other things small girls enjoyed put a bounce in her step. *Don't get ahead of yourself.* This was the initial meeting. Until the dad agreed, it was not a done deal.

She'd prayed for so long to make a difference in a kid's life, and God had answered.

Amy headed down the staircase to the meeting rooms. The low hum of male voices quickened her pace. What would the girl look like? Would they hit it off right away? And would the dad be cute?

*Cute? Really, Amy?* Who cared what the father looked like? A romance would be inappropriate given the situation. And, anyway, she'd been scorched at love twice. She would *not* put her heart on the line again.

The hallway walls were filled with pictures of kids doing crafts at previous vacation Bible schools. Excitement spurred her forward. Life was falling into place. Business was booming at her quilt shop, she'd finally gotten up the nerve to submit a portfolio of her fabric designs to several manufacturers and now this! She'd never intended to remain single, but that's how life had worked out. Helping this little girl would ease the longing in her heart for a child of her own.

She peeked into the preschool room. Hannah Moore, the pastor's wife, was standing next to their toddler son, Daniel, and a young girl.

*It's her!*

Dark blond hair cascaded over the girl's shoulders. She looked woefully thin under a purple sweater and striped leggings. Amy couldn't see her face, but she stood stiffly near Daniel, who was pushing a toy dump truck on the colorful ABC area rug. As much as Amy longed to join them, she continued toward the door at the end of the hall where Pastor Moore was waiting with the father.

Entering the conference room, she greeted the pastor then turned her attention to the man sitting at the end of the table. Her stomach plunged to her toes, the sensation worse than the roller coaster incident in eighth grade.

*No! This can't be... He can't be...*

Her knees wobbled to the brink of collapse. Unable to hear a word the pastor was saying, she shook her head, her gaze locked on familiar blue-green eyes. Every instinct screamed for her to run, to get out of there, to make sense of the fact Nash Bolton was in the room.

Nash. The man she'd loved completely. The one she'd thought she'd marry. The guy who had left town over a decade ago—no goodbye, no explanation. The jerk who had never come back.

It hit her then... The little girl she'd been asked to unofficially mentor?

His daughter.

She was having a nightmare. She'd wake up and be in her bed under her favorite quilt—

“Thank you for meeting us tonight,” Pastor Moore said.

It wasn't a nightmare. And yet it was.

She blinked a few times and sat in the nearest chair, forcing herself to focus on the pastor's face. In his early thirties, he had a kind air about him.

“Sure.” She hoped her lips were curving into what could pass as a smile.

Pastor Moore gestured to Nash. “Amy Deerson, this is—”

“We know each other.” Nash's deep voice was firm, and its familiar timbre unlocked memories she'd thought long gone.

She dared not look at him. Couldn't handle whatever she would find in his expression. Regret? Sarcasm? Pity? Didn't matter—her feelings for him *were* dead. She'd been over him for a long time—years and years. The shock of seeing him had sent her into a tizzy. That was all. In a few minutes, she'd be fine.

“Good.” The pastor took a seat opposite her. “I've had such a strong feeling about you helping little Ruby.”

*Ruby.* The girl's name was Ruby.

“Amy has been training for several months to be a mentor. She's passed her background checks and is willing to devote the extra time you mentioned Ruby needs. And with none of our other trained mentors available to help at this time, well...it seems ideal. With your permission, I'll tell her about Ruby's situation. Or would you like to?”

Nash brought his fist to his mouth and cleared his throat. He looked older, his face harsher than she remembered. And he'd filled out. Still wiry, but with more muscles in his arms and chest. Gone was the young cowboy she'd loved. In his place was a chiseled man.

Their past flashed back. The day they'd met. Their first kiss. His big grin and slicing sense of humor. The future they'd planned. Oh, how her heart had overflowed for him. And then he'd disappeared, leaving her devastated.

And now he was back. And she—out of all the women in this town—had been asked to spend time with *his child* when all she'd wanted was to marry him and be the mother of his babies? *God, You wouldn't be this cruel. This is a joke, right?*

“Pastor,” Nash said, “could you give us a moment, please?”

“Of course.” He stood. “I'll see how it's going in the preschool room. Be back in a few minutes.”

Amy straightened. She wanted to look away but didn't. It had been ten years. She'd moved on. And the fact he had a daughter made it quite obvious he had, as well.

“I didn't know, Amy. I never would have agreed to come if—”

“If you'd known I was involved.” She hated how snippy she sounded. And that his full lips and high cheekbones still made her chest flutter. His cropped brown hair gave him a maturity his previous waves had not. The laugh lines around his eyes were a kick in the gut. He'd been carefree,

rising to the top of the professional bull riding circuit while she'd nursed a broken heart. And he hadn't cared one bit.

He hadn't loved her.

He'd loved someone else and had a baby with her.

"So, she's your daughter." She was surprised she wasn't yelling at him.

"No."

No? What was he talking about?

"She's my little sister."

"I know that's not true," she snapped. "You're an orphan."

"Yeah, about being an orphan." He shifted his jaw. "Not quite."

\* \* \*

Nash had known moving back to Sweet Dreams was dumber than climbing on the world's meanest bull while recovering from a broken rib, but he'd done both anyway. The bull hadn't been nearly as scary as the thought of running into Amy. He'd been in town a mere week and already his worst fear had come true. Except this was even worse than running into her. This was...horrible...beyond bad.

He'd loved Amy more than anything on earth. That's why he'd had to leave all those years ago—to protect her.

But now another female needed his protection. He would give Ruby all the love and normalcy he'd missed out on as a kid, and if it meant living in the same town as Amy, so be it.

He just hadn't planned on running into her this soon. In fact, he hadn't put any thought into what he'd do when he eventually *did* run into her, which was inevitable in a small town.

How could he tell her everything that needed to be said in a few minutes? It was hard to concentrate with her big coffee-colored eyes shooting knives his way, not to mention her long dark brown hair tumbling over her shoulders, reminding him of its silkiness. Creamy skin, curvy figure—she looked even better than when he'd left, and she'd been a knockout back then.

"What do you mean, 'not quite'?" Her clipped words told him loud and clear how hard this was for her. He owed her...so much.

"I wasn't an orphan. I lied to you." It had been the only lie he'd told her. And it had torn them apart. She just didn't know it.

"I see."

He hesitated. "The pastor will be back soon, so I'll give you the condensed version. My mother had me when she was fifteen years old. She was a drug addict and, at times, a prostitute. She told me she didn't know who my father was—could have been any number of guys. I haven't seen or talked to her in over ten years. In December I got a call saying she'd died of a heroin overdose. That's when I found out I had a little sister."

The chaos of the past four months gripped his muscles in relentless tension. He shrugged his shoulders one at a time to relieve it, which didn't work. Amy stared at him with a mix of disbelief and disgust.

"How did you get custody of her then? Wouldn't someone close to her, someone she was familiar with, raise her?"

"You'd think so, right?" He flexed his fingers. "Needless to say, my mother didn't leave a will. Ruby's father is like mine—unknown. Our mother was turning tricks for drugs at the time and had no idea who he was. Believe me, the courts and I did our best to find out. We had little to go on. No one else wants the kid."

Amy's face looked ready to crack into a million pieces. "Do *you* want her?"

"Yes."

"A child isn't a duty."

“Exactly.” He lightly thumped his knuckles on the table. “That’s what I told the judge when I petitioned to be her guardian. I couldn’t let her grow up the way I did.” He hadn’t meant to admit the last part. When they’d dated, he’d purposely not discussed his upbringing with Amy. He hadn’t wanted her to know the depravity of his youth. Since he’d moved to Sweet Dreams from Sheridan, Wyoming, when he was thirteen, hiding his childhood hadn’t been difficult to do.

What did it matter now? He’d lost all rights with her the day he’d skipped town.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He had to get back on track. “Ruby’s been growing up in a bad—I’m talking highly dysfunctional—environment. The night our mother died, the police went to the apartment she’d been living in. Ruby was there, alone. No food. Heat was turned off. Electricity, too. Who knows how long she’d been there by herself? Believe me when I say the only stable times in the girl’s life have been when she was in foster care while our mother was in jail.”

Amy’s eyes widened, and she blinked rapidly. Then she lifted her chin. “Why here? Why bring her to Sweet Dreams?”

Because he’d had no other choice. Ten years ago he’d purchased a home nearby, but that had been when he’d still believed he could have it all, including Amy.

“I own property outside of town. As soon as the court awarded me custody, Ruby’s therapist recommended I get her settled as soon as possible, and she was adamant about Ruby needing stability. I’d bought the house and land before...well...before I left, but I’ve never lived there. I’ve been renting it out. The therapist urged me to raise Ruby here permanently.”

“Back up.” She brought her hand in front of her, palm out, fingers splayed. “You own a house here?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess I didn’t know you at all.” She tucked her lips under as if trying to get her emotions under control. “Not an orphan. Bought a house—I’m assuming when we were still together. What else didn’t you tell me?”

Regret thundered through his veins. He wished he was on a bull, in the chute, ready to be released into the dirt arena. It was the only place he’d ever been able to escape. He imagined wrapping his hand with the rosined rope...

“Never mind. I don’t want to know.” She turned her head to the side, exposing the pale skin of her neck.

“The reason I left—”

“No.” She held her hand out. “You don’t get to do this now. I’m not interested in your confession. It’s too late. I’m here for one reason—to mentor a little girl. Whatever you want to get off your chest will have to stay there.”

“You would still help her?” Nash had to give it to her—she was courageous. He’d always admired her quiet strength, her morals, the way she’d soothe anything bothering him. And he’d thrown it all away.

“I don’t know.” Her dark eyebrows formed a V. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“She’s withdrawn, malnourished, fearful. She was placed with a young couple while the courts decided if I could be her permanent legal guardian. I visited as often as allowed. It took a long time before she warmed up to me. The day I gained custody was the day we moved here. The therapist thought it would be best. No more temporary living arrangements.”

“So you’re here to stay.”

“Yes.”

“For as long as Ruby needs.”

“Forever. Dottie Lavert will help out when she can. Clint’s nearby. Wade isn’t far. Marshall, too.” Clint Romine, Wade Croft and Marshall Graham were his best friends—practically his brothers

—from his time at Yearling Group Home. They'd all been sent to the group foster home as young teens, and they'd stayed friends as adults.

“Good. Sounds like you don't need me.”

“I wouldn't be here if Ruby didn't need someone. The therapist wants her to have a positive female influence. A consistent presence—someone who can give her a better understanding of how a caring woman acts. Basically, the opposite of our mother. It's too much to ask of you, though. Like I said, I never in a million years would have dreamed...”

“What? That I would want to help a child?”

*That you wouldn't have a houseful of kids of your own.* And he knew she didn't. Clint had told him she was single. He had no clue why. She was the most nurturing person he knew.

“Clint told me you keep busy with your quilts and the store. I didn't think you'd be willing to give up so much time for a stranger's kid.”

“Yes, well, I like children, and I want to make a difference. I just think the situation is too bizarre for me to be Ruby's mentor. It would be uncomfortable for us both.”

*Exactly.* This had been an extremely uncomfortable ten minutes.

“I agree. Hopefully, the pastor has someone else who can help. I'm not looking for a babysitter—I retired from bull riding and I'll be spending all my time with Ruby until she starts school next year—but given the circumstances...well...she needs more than me.”

Amy wrapped her arms around her waist and didn't reply.

The problems he'd faced over the past four months galloped back. Learning his mother was dead. Retiring from the profession he'd loved. Figuring out how to live in one spot when all he'd done was travel for a decade. Raising Ruby, who was emotionally stunted, when he had no idea how to be a parent. And this meeting—he'd been so hopeful the woman would be exactly what Ruby needed. From what the pastor said, no one else was available. A clawing feeling gripped his throat.

He wasn't equipped for any of this. And he really hated failing.

“I hope you were able to catch up.” The pastor walked back in, a big smile on his face. “Amy, now that you are more aware of what Ruby has been through, do you have any questions? Concerns?”

“Yes.”

The hair on the back of Nash's neck bristled.

“As Nash mentioned, we knew each other a long time ago. In fact, we dated. Given this information, don't you think someone else should be paired with Ruby?”

“Well, it depends.” He cupped his chin, rubbing his jaw. “I'm assuming it wasn't an amicable parting.”

Amy quickly shook her head. Nash looked away.

“If you both can put your personal feelings aside and keep Ruby the main priority, then I don't think there's a problem. But if there is any revenge in either of your hearts, I urge you to decline. You won't be able to support Ruby the way that she needs. We must all work together for her. She's been through enough. Wouldn't you agree?”

“Yes,” they replied at the same time.

“Since you dated some years ago, I'm guessing you've both moved on, so I don't think it will be an issue. And it's up to you two how much interaction you want to have. Amy, why don't you meet Ruby before making any decisions?” The pastor tilted his head, watching her response. She considered for a moment before nodding. He smiled. “Good. I'll take you down there. Nash, you wait here, and we can talk more when I get back.”

Nash tracked Amy's moves as she left the room. An ache spread across his chest. She would never agree to help Ruby.

*Lord, I can't do this alone. Please have mercy on me.*

He'd given Ruby a nice house, clothes, food and love, but he couldn't give her a mother. The only woman he'd ever wanted was Amy, and he'd never forgive himself for leaving her in such a cowardly fashion. He hadn't given her a warning, hadn't even said goodbye.

Moving back to Sweet Dreams and glimpsing Amy occasionally would have been punishment enough, but being in regular contact with her?

He couldn't imagine a more painful scenario.

She'd been his. And he'd forfeited all claims to her.

He should be glad Amy wouldn't agree to this arrangement. Would make life easier for him. But where did that leave Ruby? He could not let his baby sister—the child he now considered his daughter—to grow up as damaged as him.

\* \* \*

"You must be Ruby." Amy crouched in front of the play kitchen where the tiny blonde stood. The girl flinched, backing up to the wall. Amy ached to put her at ease. "I'm Amy."

Ruby's mouth slackened, her blue-green eyes opening wide with distrust. Nash's eyes. She resembled him in other ways, too. Wide forehead, high cheekbones. But Nash's nose was longer, while Ruby's was a perfect button.

Hannah and little Daniel were coloring pictures at one of the children's tables. Amy wasn't sure what to do. The girl's body language shouted fear.

"Would you like me to read you a book?" Amy gestured to the beanbags next to a small bookshelf.

Ruby didn't blink, didn't move. Her lips trembled.

"It's okay." She longed to touch her cheek, to reassure her, but she sensed any physical contact would terrify the girl. "Why don't I pick one out, and you can come over if you'd like?"

She crossed to the shelf and selected a Curious George picture book. Then she lowered her body into one of the beanbags. How she would get out of it, she had no idea. Boy, it was low to the ground. Ruby hadn't moved but still stared intently at her. Amy plastered on a big smile and waved for her to come over.

Ruby didn't so much as twitch.

Maybe if she started reading it, the girl would join her. She read the first five pages out loud and peeked over the cover. Still staring. She read five more pages. Ruby had drifted a few feet in her direction. Progress. She continued until the end. Ruby stood about three feet away, her eyes locked on Amy's face.

"You know, pretty soon you'll be able to go to school, and you'll learn how to read."

"I know some letters." She spoke with a lisp.

Amy nodded, encouraging the sign of interest. What this child must have been through. Left unsupervised with no food or heat. Disgraceful.

"Do you see any letters you recognize on the cover?" Amy held the book out.

"E. O." She pointed to the letters.

"Good job! You're very smart. Do you want me to read another book?"

She didn't respond.

"Why don't I pick one out?"

Pastor Moore and Nash came into the room. Ruby raced to Nash, wrapping her arms around his legs as if she never wanted to let him go. The sight made Amy's stomach clench. Ruby trusted Nash. It was obvious. And if Amy had to guess, the child didn't trust another living soul.

"Hey, RuRu, how do you like this fun place? We'll be coming to church here every Sunday." He hoisted her into his arms, settling her on his hip. She let her head fall onto his shoulder and wound her arms around his neck. "Us grown-ups have to talk a few more minutes, so you stay here and color with Daniel, okay?"

She buried her face in his shoulder.

“Honey, I will only be gone a few minutes.” His voice was soft, tender. He glanced at Pastor Moore, then Amy. “Would you give us a sec?”

“Of course.” The pastor waited for Amy to join him, and they went back to the conference room. “What did you think?”

“I think you were right to contact me. I know it’s not the church’s traditional program, but she seems...well...a bit traumatized.”

“Yes. She’s been through a lot. Tell me, Amy, do you see yourself as being her mentor? Now that you know her situation? Not to mention the man who will be raising her is someone from your past?”

Ruby’s face, demeanor and adorable lisp all came to mind. Yes, she could see herself as the girl’s mentor. She longed to make life better—normal—for the sweet child. To earn Ruby’s trust would mean the world to her.

But interacting with Nash?

No.

Just no.

Sure, she’d moved on and didn’t need to know Nash’s reasons for leaving, but the hurt was still there. Even if she and Ruby only met privately, looking in the girl’s eyes would be like looking into Nash’s. Amy didn’t know if she could do it.

But how could she admit to the pastor all the thoughts churning in her brain?

“I have a lot of mixed emotions about this. If it was anyone but Nash, I’d be setting up a schedule tonight. She’s so teeny. And four years is a dear age.”

“Are you over him?” the pastor asked gently.

“Yes.” She nodded too quickly. “Haven’t seen him in a decade.”

“I see. Are you worried you won’t be able to handle a long-term commitment with Ruby?”

Was she? Any arrangement with Ruby meant interacting with Nash. What if she got mad at him, or he blurted out the reason he left and it devastated her? Would she still be able to give Ruby the attention she needed?

“Kind of. This is all sudden.”

“Let’s pray about it.” He bowed his head, and Amy clasped her hands. “Heavenly Father, You are all-knowing and almighty. Please give Amy and Nash clarity about what is best for Ruby. If Amy isn’t the person You have in mind to help, make that clear, and lead another of our church members to step forward and answer the call. Above all, we pray You will heal Ruby’s hurts and comfort her. Lead us to support Nash as he navigates the new waters of fatherhood. In Your name we pray.”

“Amen,” Amy whispered. The reference to answering the call pierced her conscience. It had been more than a year since she’d begun praying about mentoring a child. How many times had she prayed to be paired with a young boy or girl? Too many to count.

“If you’re willing, let’s ask Nash and Ruby to meet us here again tomorrow night. It will allow you to spend a little more time with her before making your decision. If you want to help, you and Nash can work out a schedule then. If not, I’ll talk to him about other options.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Are there any other mentors who could help Ruby?”

“Not at this time, but a few of our retired ladies might be willing to spend a Saturday afternoon each month with her.”

Amy frowned. Would a few Saturday afternoons be enough for Ruby?

Nash came back into the room. His Western shirt and jeans couldn’t hide the fact he was built out of rock-solid muscle. It wasn’t as though she was attracted to him—she merely had eyes. He was a good-looking man. Who’d broken her heart and left her so he could ride bulls and be a superstar.

“Ah, Nash, good. Amy and I were talking about not rushing into this. Would you be willing to come back tomorrow night? Given this new development, I think you both could use some space before making a decision.”

“Sure.” He crossed his arms, then quickly uncrossed them. “And if it’s a no?”

Pastor Moore smiled. “We have options. None as good as Amy, but don’t worry. We won’t let you and Ruby down.”

“Okay. Does seven work for you?”

Amy nodded. Why was she even considering this set-up? No one—*no one*—would fault her for saying no. If it was anyone else, she’d do it. She ignored the voice in her head telling her she was only thinking of herself. Maybe she was, but who could blame her?

After murmuring goodbye, she hurried out of the room and stopped in her tracks. Ruby stood with Hannah and Daniel in the hallway. Her blank expression turned Amy’s legs to lead.

If only the child would smile or cry or...something. Amy had been around a lot of children during her years teaching Sunday school. She was used to the highs and lows of their moods. However, she couldn’t categorize Ruby’s emotional state. She seemed completely unengaged with the world. No joy, no hope—nothing.

As much as Amy wanted to avoid Nash, she also wanted to brighten this little girl’s life. Give her a reason to smile.

She had a lot to pray about.

“Guess what?” She approached Ruby, bending to speak at her level. “We can read another story tomorrow night. How does that sound?”

Ruby looked at her blankly. “I like the monkey book.”

“I do, too.” Amy straightened, surprised at the emotion clogging her throat. “See you tomorrow.”

If she agreed to this, she’d lose her heart to Ruby. Maybe already had. Losing her heart to a child she could handle. But losing it to Nash again? She would never let that happen. Not when her life was finally falling into place.

## Chapter Two

Nash clipped the walkie-talkie to his belt and strode to the barn the next afternoon. Breathing in the cool air, he let the sun’s rays soothe his agitation. Ruby had fallen asleep watching cartoons. Normally, the girl didn’t nap—she fought sleep something fierce—so the fact she’d conked out was a blessing. He’d only been her guardian for a week, and already the role felt impossible.

He wasn’t a dad. He was a broken-down, retired bull rider. Sure, he’d risen to the top of his profession and made gobs of money, but he didn’t know how to do domestic. At thirty-one years old, he had a lot of life left to figure out, like how he was going to spend his days from now on. Inspecting his property would be a start.

Snow must have thawed recently for the ground to still be soft. This part of Wyoming tended to be dry. He checked the walkie-talkie again. If Ruby woke up and he wasn’t there... Her terrified face from two nights ago still bothered him. He’d put her to bed, read her a story and gotten ready to leave. She’d clung to his arm, shaking her head, her eyes wild. He’d asked her what was wrong, but she just kept repeating, “Don’t go.” So he’d stayed until she fell asleep. An hour later, she’d woken up, screaming. Scared him half to death. He’d cradled her in his arms, wishing he could have been there for her from birth to protect her. It had taken another hour before she’d stopped shaking.

Sometimes he wished his mother was alive just so he could chew her out. But she wasn’t, and he was left to fix her mistakes. Not that Ruby was a mistake...but her upbringing had been disastrous.

Could he fix Ruby?

Yesterday he’d bought the walkie-talkies and showed Ruby how to use them. He’d said, “If I’m not in the room with you, all you have to do is press this button and holler for me. Then take your finger off, and you’ll be able to hear me talk.” They’d practiced until she was an old pro.

He chuckled. He’d probably be at her beck and call from now on. Not that he minded. The girl was as cute as could be. His mission was to help her find her smile. He wanted to keep it there. Make her forget a lifetime of trauma and neglect.

He slid open the barn door and counted the stalls as he walked through. Enough for ten horses. He already owned six. His friend Wade had been boarding them for him while he was on the road competing. The other outbuildings held his equipment. The property had one fenced-in pasture and plenty of land for any number of operations.

Lately, he'd been thinking about opening a training facility for young bull riders. But he wasn't sure if he should. Just because he had the property to train kids didn't mean he had the ability to teach. Maybe he'd be better off breeding horses. He certainly wasn't running a cow-calf operation like their friend Clint. Which reminded him...he hadn't talked to Marshall in a while. He'd better call him soon.

After shutting the barn door, Nash went back into the house. A pang of regret hit him every time he entered. Before moving back, the last time he'd been inside had been the day he'd bought it as a surprise for Amy. An engagement present. He'd been planning on proposing to her the next week. Then his mother, once again, had destroyed his life.

The diamond ring still sat in its box in his top drawer. He really should sell it.

Like he ever would.

He checked on Ruby, asleep and curled up in a tight ball like a dog afraid of getting kicked. He kissed her soft cheek before going to the kitchen. The company he'd hired to paint and decorate the house had done a good job. He'd given them free rein and a blank check. Just told them to make it feel like a family lived there and to make sure Ruby's room was fit for a princess. If only money could fix all of his problems, but the millions in the bank couldn't win Ruby's trust or buy Amy's forgiveness.

Amy was going to say no to helping Ruby. And while her refusal would be best for him, it definitely was not best for Ruby.

The girl hid apples and packages of crackers under her pillow and in her closet. He'd found cookies in her shoe. The therapist had warned him it might take a while for her to believe she'd always have enough to eat. Whenever he found food, he was supposed to gently remind her she was safe with him and he would always provide for her.

He sat on one of the bar stools at the island, dropping his forehead into his hands. The enormity of the situation threatened to overcome him.

*I'm not qualified for this. What if she always hoards food and wakes up screaming? What if she never smiles? Is too scared to go to school? What if she's been damaged beyond repair?*

He raised his head toward the ceiling.

*God, I need You.*

Ruby had no one but him.

He'd handle it. He had to.

\* \* \*

Amy girded her shoulders and entered the church at 6:55 pm. She'd spent the past twenty-four hours talking to her mom, her best friend, Lexi Romine, and the Lord. Lexi and Mom thought she should decline being Ruby's mentor. The Lord, it seemed, had other plans.

Every time she prayed, she kept coming back to Isaiah 6:8: "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me." She'd prayed for so long to help a child. How many times had she thought *Here am I, Lord. Send me?*

And now that the opportunity was here, she couldn't justify turning it down. Every time she tried, her argument fell flat. She kept thinking of the Old Testament story about Joseph. If Joseph could forgive his brothers for selling him into slavery and then provide for them so their families didn't starve, couldn't she move past her issues with Nash to help Ruby?

Maybe this was her cross to bear.

But could she bear it?

With her back straight and head high, she strode to the preschool room. This wasn't for Nash. It was for Ruby.

Maybe Nash didn't keep his promises, but she kept hers. She'd promised the Lord she would do His will.

She believed this was His will.

After entering the room, she halted at the sight of Ruby on Nash's lap. The child held a stuffed sheep in the air and was pretending to make it dance. She wasn't smiling, but the fact she was playing was a good sign.

"Hello, Ruby." She waved. "Who is this sheep? He's quite the dancer."

She immediately clutched the animal to her tummy like a wild rabbit stilling at the first hint of danger.

Nash took the sheep out of Ruby's hand. "I think this is Sheldon. Sheldon the sheep. Is that right, RuRu?"

She turned to see his face. A hint of a smile lifted her lips, and she nodded.

"Or it could be Samantha." Amy slowly approached them, trying to be as non-threatening as possible. "Are you sure it's a boy?"

He flipped the sheep over twice then sniffed its head. "It smells like a boy. It's not all flowery like a girl." He held it up for Ruby to smell. She took a sniff. "What do you think?"

"Boy," she said.

"Well, it is very nice to meet you, Sheldon." Amy held her hand out and pretended to shake the animal's paw. "Would he like to sit on your lap while we read a book?"

Ruby didn't respond.

"Should we try another Curious George? See what trouble that silly monkey gets into today?"

Amy selected a book and folded her long legs to sit in the beanbag, grunting as she sank the final inches. Ruby brought the stuffed animal over. She didn't sit, though.

"Stay?" Ruby asked Nash, her gaze full of worry.

"I'd hate to miss the story." He folded his legs to sit cross-legged on the carpet. The process looked painful. Ruby, clutching Sheldon, settled on his lap, and he tickled her side.

"Daddy!" She giggled and squirmed. Nash stopped teasing her, kissing the top of her head instead.

*Daddy?* Amy ignored the pitter-patter of her heart at the sight of Nash in such a paternal role. Maybe if she and Ruby met privately, the arrangement would work. They could make cookies and color. They could go to the library and check out books or stop into The Beanery for hot chocolates.

If she was going to be part of Ruby's life, it had to be on her terms. And that meant spending time alone with Ruby. No Nash allowed.

After reading two books, she asked Ruby if she wanted to pretend to bake a cake. Ruby followed her to the play kitchen, and Nash declared he'd be back in a few minutes. He had to speak to the pastor. As soon as Nash left, Ruby became expressionless, the way she'd been in the hallway yesterday.

"First we need flour and sugar." Amy pointed to the fake boxes of food. "Can you find them?"

She stood with her arms glued to her sides. *Okay.* Amy grabbed a box and pretended to pour it into a plastic bowl. "Mmm... I love cake batter. Here's some butter. Throw it in." She handed plastic butter to Ruby, who let it fall into the bowl.

"And eggs. My cakes always have eggs. Let's crack them." Amy tapped the plastic egg against the table and pretended to drop it in. Ruby ignored the egg in front of her. "We're ready to mix." She found the plastic hand-mixer and gave it to the girl. "Give it a good stir."

She obeyed, but Amy got the impression she was merely going through the motions, that she wasn't enjoying herself.

Hannah and Daniel entered. "Hello, you two. Ruby, would you mind staying here with Daniel and me while Amy talks to your dad for a minute?"

Ruby just stared at her.

“I won’t be long.” Amy found Sheldon and gave him to Ruby. “Here. Make sure this sheep doesn’t get into any trouble.” Although she hated leaving her, she went to the meeting room.

“Well, I trust you’ve both had time to pray about the situation.” Pastor Moore waited for her to sit. Nash was in the same spot as yesterday. “What do you think?”

She considered for a moment. The previous twenty minutes solidified her opinion. With patience and a woman’s touch, Ruby had a better chance at coming out of her shell. And Amy wanted to be that woman.

“I would like to spend more time with Ruby.” Amy watched Nash. He jerked to attention. “But I don’t know if you’ll be comfortable with my suggestion.”

His eyes darkened. “What is it?”

“Would you be okay with me spending time with Ruby alone? I’d love to show her around my studio, take her to the library, that sort of thing.”

He bowed his head. “I’m not sure.”

“I don’t know if I can agree if it’s going to be the three of us all the time. It’s a bit intimate given our history.”

He blew out a breath. “I understand. Really, I do. I’m thinking about Ruby. I know you’d be good for her, and frankly, I’d prefer she spend time alone with you. But she’s going through a lot. What do you think, Pastor?”

He’d prefer not to be around her, either? Why the words hurt, she didn’t know. It’s not as if the past ten years hadn’t proven the fact.

“I think you should follow your instincts, Nash.” The pastor addressed Amy. “Ruby is afraid of strangers. It will take time for her to get used to you. She might need Nash with her until she’s comfortable.”

Amy swallowed the sour taste in her mouth. It wasn’t as if she didn’t know the pastor had a point, but she was already going out on a limb by agreeing to this. Couldn’t they cut her a break?

“I guess we could do a trial run,” she said. “Say, a few afternoons next week and see how it goes? If we aren’t feeling it, we’ll go our separate ways.”

“Works for me,” Nash said gruffly.

Pastor Moore stood. “I’m here if either of you need to talk or have additional concerns. Feel free to call. Why don’t I let you two work out the details of next week?” He left the room, and the air felt charged as soon as he was gone.

With no idea what to say, she fixed her gaze on the map of ancient Israel hanging on the wall. Nash remained silent, as well.

“How weird is this for you?” Amy finally asked him.

“Really weird.” His throat worked.

“Gives me a new appreciation for what divorced parents must go through. Coming up with a visitation schedule, figuring out drop-offs and all that.”

“Except we were never divorced,” he said. “Or married.”

The words hurt, she couldn’t deny it, but Nash seemed unsure of himself, and Amy had never seen this side of him. He’d always been quick with a joke and oh, so confident.

He massaged the back of his neck. “Sorry... Thank you for agreeing to help Ruby. I know you don’t want details, but what I did back then was unforgivable. I at least want you to know I hated leaving you.”

*Then why did you?*

She didn’t want to know.

“It was a long time ago.” She waved the apology off like a pesky fly. “Which days work best for you?”

Storm clouds brewed in his eyes, but he accepted the change in subject. “Any you have free. I have nothing going on.”

“So you really retired?”

“I did.”

She wanted to ask what he planned to do next, but she stopped herself. She didn’t need personal information from him. She’d stick to business—to Ruby. Which reminded her...a few things had been niggling in her mind.

“Does Ruby know you aren’t her father?”

“Yes. I explained I’m her much bigger brother. It took several supervised visits at her foster home before she’d even speak to me.”

“But she calls you Daddy.”

He shrugged, a smile briefly lighting his face. “When I told her she was going to live with me, I asked her what she wanted to call me. She said, ‘How long am I going to live with you?’ I told her forever. She replied, ‘Daddy.’ I tell you, my heart melted into a puddle right there on the linoleum floor of the courthouse.”

Amy’s heart was growing squishy, too, and that wouldn’t do. *Remember the days after he left? How you sat by the phone hoping he’d call? And don’t forget how awful it was to read about him winning the event in Houston. Going on with his life as if you’d never meant a thing to him.*

“Yes, well, that’s good.” She reached into her purse for her planner. Opening it, she scanned the next week’s schedule. “Why don’t we do Tuesday and Thursday, say, three o’clock? You can bring her to my apartment. It’s above Amy’s Quilt Shop. Just go around the back and up the stairs. I have a studio I think she’ll enjoy.”

All the brightly colored fabrics, the work tables, sewing machines and art supplies were sure to please the girl. She’d plan a few simple crafts for them to do.

“You don’t have to work at three?” He frowned.

“No, I hired a high school girl to work afternoons.”

“Tuesday and Thursday then. Listen, Ruby is shy around...well, everyone. She might have a hard time being in a strange place without me.”

“You could go to The Beanery after you drop her off. If she gets upset, we’ll join you and get a hot cocoa or something.”

“That might work.” His face cleared, and his shoulders relaxed. “Does this mean you’ll make a final decision next week?”

“Do you really want me to spend time with Ruby? Or do you feel cornered into it?”

“I want Ruby to trust other people. I mean, she’ll be going to school soon, and I don’t want her scared of her teachers. Would it be easier on me if someone else was her mentor? Yeah. But I’m grateful you’re willing to try. She needs more than I alone can give her.”

*So having a different mentor would be easier on him, huh?* She bit back a nasty retort. The insecurity in his eyes pacified her irritation. Her decision wasn’t about Nash anyway. It was about trusting God even when the circumstances didn’t make sense. She’d always wondered if she would step up and take care of an enemy if put into the position of being a Good Samaritan.

She’d regret it if she didn’t at least *try* to help Ruby.

“Then, yes, let’s see how the visits go, and I’ll give you a firm answer next week.”

\* \* \*

“Wade’s delivering my horses soon.” Nash sat in a white rocking chair on his front porch Tuesday afternoon. Clint Romine, one of his best friends, sat next to him in an identical chair. Ruby was picking pasqueflowers from the yard. He still had a little time before he had to take her to Amy’s place. He had no idea how their meeting would go, but he feared the worst. Those early visits with her at the foster home had been terrible. But maybe Ruby was in a better mental place now. He hoped so.

“How long has it been since you’ve ridden Crank?”

“Four months. I’m itching to saddle up. Could ride for days, I think, and I’d still feel as restless as a mountain lion.”

“You’ve been traveling the circuit since we graduated high school. Of course you’re restless.” Clint lived outside of Sweet Dreams with his pretty new bride, Lexi, who happened to be Amy’s best friend. Another complication Nash didn’t know how to handle. Would his move back to Sweet Dreams be awkward for Clint and Lexi, given how he’d treated Amy years ago? He’d worry about it another day.

Nash sighed. “I’ve got to figure out what I’m going to do now that I’m here.”

Clint stared ahead, slowly rocking. How could he sit there so calmly? Nash was about to bust out of his rocker. He didn’t care if the decorator claimed the chairs cozied up the porch; they made him feel like a grandpa. A sprint up the drive would go a long way to helping him let off some steam. But the sad truth was he couldn’t sprint if he tried. His body had been so beaten up and battered that he had trouble even jogging.

“Thinking about ranching?” Clint asked.

“No.”

“Breeding horses? Wade could help with that.”

“Maybe.” He stood and paced the porch, his movements choppy. “I’ve been thinking about something different. I’m not sure it would work.”

“What’s that?”

He stopped at the column nearest Clint and leaned against the railing. “I might open a training facility. For young bull riders.”

Clint considered it a moment. “I could see it.”

“But I don’t have the experience to teach kids.”

“What are you talking about?” Clint laughed. “You have more experience in your pinky finger than anyone I know.”

“Yeah, but that’s riding bulls. Not *teaching* kids to ride them.”

“You’d be great. What would you need?”

“Steers. Bulls. A practice arena. Chutes. Equipment. Insurance—a lot of insurance.”

“There you go.”

“But knowing what I’ve been through, do I want to encourage kids to follow in my footsteps? You know the injuries I’ve sustained. And I was fortunate.”

“It’s a dilemma, that’s for sure. I guess you’ll have to pray on it.”

Last year, Clint’s response about praying on it would have annoyed Nash. But after he’d had a string of bad rides and broken his ankle and ribs for the umpteenth time, he’d spent a few months at Wade’s secluded ranch—a thirty-minute drive from Sweet Dreams—and gotten right with his Maker. He prayed about everything now.

“Will you pray about it, too, brother?” Nash asked.

“Of course.” Clint rose, nodding toward Ruby. “How’s she doing?”

“Better than I expected. When I first met her, she was so skinny her bones pushed against her skin. She was terrified. Skittish.” He shivered thinking about her back then. “I’m really sorry I missed your wedding, man. I never would have—”

“Don’t say a word, Nash.” Clint shook his head. “I understand. I would have been furious if you’d have come to the wedding when you found out about Ruby. She needed you.”

Ruby approached, eyeing Clint with distrust and avoiding him. She thrust a bouquet of purple blooms in Nash’s hands.

“For me? Well, RuRu, these are the purdiest flowers I’ve ever seen. Thank you kindly.” He winked at her. “And don’t worry about Clint here. He’s one of my best buds. We lived together when we were teens. You’ll meet my other friends, Wade and Marshall, soon enough.”

Ruby hid behind his leg. He knew her well enough to assume her gaze was fixed on Clint.

“I’ve got to be going.” Clint tipped his Stetson to Ruby. “Good to meet you. Maybe your dad will bring you out to the ranch sometime. We have lots of horses and cows and dogs. You like dogs?”

No answer. Thankfully, Clint didn't seem to need one.

"Thanks for coming." Nash clapped him on the back. "Don't be a stranger."

"Bye." Clint waved and ambled to his truck.

"Well, what do you say we get these in some water before we head over to Miss Amy's?" Her eyes had questions—a lot of questions—but he couldn't read her mind. "What's wrong? You're worried about something. I can tell."

He opened the door for her, and they went to the kitchen, putting the flowers in a mason jar with water.

"You a little scared of her?" He boosted her to sit on the counter.

"No."

"What is it? You can tell me anything."

"How long do I have to stay?"

He smiled at her lisp whenever she said her s's.

"You don't have to stay at all. But if you want to, you'll be there for one hour. And I'll be three stores down, slurping coffee. You and Amy can join me if you want, but I'd like for you to give her place a try without me first."

She gulped, her eyes wide and fearful. "One hour? How much is that?"

He almost laughed. He'd forgotten that little kids didn't have a strong sense of time. He pointed to his watch. "When this small hand goes all the way around once, an hour has passed. Maybe you need a watch of your own. We can order one for you. But right now, we've got to skedaddle if we want to be on time."

He picked her up, grabbed his keys and carried her to the garage. After strapping her into her car seat, he backed out and drove toward town. Despite the assurances he'd given Ruby, he had a bad feeling about this visit. Ruby already seemed fearful. What if she made a scene at Amy's? If she did, he wouldn't be able to leave her there, and then Amy would back out.

If Ruby was upset about staying with Amy, he wouldn't force the issue. The kid had been through enough. He just hoped his uneasiness didn't mean his fears were about to come true.

### Chapter Three

Amy hummed as she fluffed the throw pillows on her couch. Ruby would be here any minute. She rushed to the other side of the open living space where she kept her private sewing and art studio. If she wasn't cutting material, quilting or making patterns for her weekly blog, she was drawing designs for her own fabric line. Well, hopefully, her own fabric line. She should be hearing back from the fabric manufacturers within a few weeks. How many years had she dreamed of stocking the designs she'd drawn? She shook her head. None of that mattered right now. Her sole goal today was to make Ruby comfortable.

A knock on the door made her pause. *Lord, please give me the wisdom to help her.* She'd show Nash his fears about leaving Ruby were off base. She'd been around young children her entire life. She knew what little girls enjoyed. It would just take a while for Ruby to get used to her. No big deal.

She opened the door. Nash held Ruby in his arms. *Oh, my.* He looked every bit the cowboy she remembered in his hat, jeans, jacket and boots.

"Come in. I'm so glad to see you again, Ruby. Let me take your sweatshirt." She waited while Nash helped Ruby out of her pink hoodie. "I'll show you around my place."

After hanging the hoodie on a hook near the door, Amy veered left to the open studio. She stopped next to the floor-to-ceiling shelves, which held fabrics in a rainbow of colors. In the center of the space, Ruby clutched Nash's hand.

"You did all this?" Nash let out a low whistle. "Everything is so organized. You actually make all those quilts you sell?"

“Most of them. I consign a few local artists’ quilts, too.” She shouldn’t be so pleased at his reaction. He seemed to fill the room with his charismatic energy. He used to draw her like iron to a magnet. She gestured to the rack holding her latest creation. “I’m trying a new pattern.”

He and Ruby inspected the rust, cream and navy design. “Patriotic. I like it. Reminds me of the Fourth of July.”

“I’m hoping to finish it in June. Red, white and blue quilts always sell well in the summer.”

“Speaking of this time of year...” He looked down at Ruby. “Pretty soon you and I will be watching rodeos on Friday nights. Sounds fun, huh?”

Her eyes gleamed almost aqua as she nodded up at him. The sight touched Amy.

“I can’t wait for cotton candy and barbecues.” He rubbed his stomach. “Mmm-mmm. Makes me hungry just thinking about it. In fact, I’d better get something in my tummy before it growls and scares the neighbors. I’ll be heading over to The Beanery. Text me if you need me.”

He kissed the top of Ruby’s head. Then he nodded to Amy. “I’ll be back in an hour. You girls have fun.”

As soon as the door clicked behind him, Amy let out a sigh of relief. She couldn’t help it. The room felt more spacious, less combustible without him there. She brought her palms together and turned her attention to Ruby.

“I have a ton of markers. Why don’t we color?”

Ruby gazed intently at the door, her face white as a fresh snowfall.

“He’ll be back before you know it.” Amy tried to reassure her by gently taking her hand, but Ruby yanked it out of her grasp. Her lips trembled, grew blue around the edges. Tremors shook her shoulders. The poor thing was petrified!

Amy knelt beside her. “Ruby, what’s wrong? It’s okay. You’re safe with me.”

Her eyes were so wide, so fixed on the door. Amy clearly wasn’t getting through to her. What should she do? The way Ruby had flinched at her touch, Amy didn’t want to scare her further, but she had to divert her attention away from the door.

Why was she so upset? Nash told her he’d be back in an hour. The child knew he was going down the street to the coffee shop.

Amy stood up, raising her face to the ceiling. *What now?* Whatever was going through Ruby’s mind was so frightening, she couldn’t move.

“Honey, why don’t we go get a hot chocolate with your dad?”

Ruby blinked, shivering. Then she looked away from the door at Amy. Tears began to drip from her eyes to her cheeks. She didn’t say anything. Simply nodded.

Amy tried not to let her disappointment show as she helped Ruby into her hoodie. Whatever had happened to this girl in the past had clearly traumatized her. Nash had mentioned neglect and malnourishment, and Amy had brushed over those words as if they hadn’t mattered. She should have paid more attention. She’d been so caught up in her own past she hadn’t asked the necessary questions.

The psychological damage must have cut deep. Was Amy qualified for this?

She led Ruby to the staircase. “Hold my hand, okay?”

Ruby tucked her tiny hand in Amy’s. The gesture pinched her heart. If only she *could* help this girl. She needed more information. And that meant, as much as she didn’t want to, she’d have to find a way to meet privately with Nash.

\* \* \*

The coffee was perfect—strong with a kick to it. Same as he liked his bulls. He grinned at his own inside joke. The Beanery was quiet. He hadn’t been in here before. Looked new, rustic. Smelled great, too. He took a drink. Leaving Ruby hadn’t been too bad. She hadn’t thrown a fit or anything. So why couldn’t he dismiss the nagging worry in his brain?

He smacked his forehead. He hadn’t stopped to ask Ruby if she wanted to stay. He’d just left.

He should have asked her. Why hadn't he thought to ask her? His knee was bouncing triple time. *Get yourself together, man.*

He checked his watch. He'd been gone seven minutes. Fifty-three minutes to go. It was times like these that made him wish he was a reader. A book would help pass the time.

The door clanged open, and Ruby raced to him, her face beaming. A lead weight dropped in his gut. If they were here and it had only been seven minutes, the visit couldn't have gone well.

He swung her onto his lap and gave her a big smile. She didn't need to know his emotions were churning. "To what do I owe this pleasure? I thought I was picking you up in an hour." He noted the tear stains down her cheeks and fought back a groan. "You were worried I'd be lonely, weren't you? That's awfully nice of you to be thinking of me."

She rested her cheek against his chest, and he brushed her hair from her face, holding her tightly. Amy stood behind the chair across the table. He mouthed, "What happened?"

She shook her head quickly and mouthed, "Later."

"Can I get you a hot chocolate, Ruby?" Amy asked. "With whipped cream?"

Ruby nodded. If she wasn't so fragile, he'd remind her of her manners. But right now *please* and *thank you* were the least of his worries. If he couldn't leave her with Amy for ten minutes, would he ever be able to leave her anywhere?

A vision came to mind of kindergarten in another year, and instead of Ruby waving happily as she walked into school with a backpack and a lunchbox, he saw her trembling, crying, unable to enter. Some of the bull riders' wives homeschooled their little ones. Would he be forced to do the same?

Homeschooling?

Him?

The coffee threatened to come up. He didn't think he had it in him to homeschool. Maybe he should call the therapist.

"Here you go." Amy beamed at Ruby as she set the cup down. Nash could see the worry in her exquisite brown eyes. And he recognized her tic from all those years ago—she rubbed her index finger and thumb together whenever she was out of her element. For a second he felt sorry for her. Wanted to make it better, like old times.

Old times. The best days of his life. Even better than winning his first Professional Bull Riders World Championship at the age of twenty-three. Every minute with Amy had been like a dream.

Ruby reached for the cup and licked the whipped cream.

Amy smiled, scrunching her nose at the girl. He had to avert his gaze at all the affection in her expression. He used to be the recipient of it. The past ten years suddenly felt bleaker than he remembered them.

"I was wondering," Amy said, tracing the rim of her mug, "would you two mind if I came over later? I've never seen your house." She gave Nash a charged look, and he instantly understood. They needed to talk but not with Ruby around. And the only place they could reasonably expect privacy was in Ruby's domain.

"Sure." He knew she was going to back out of their arrangement, and he didn't blame her. He suppressed a sigh. "How about seven-thirty?"

"Great." She sipped her cocoa. "How is it, Ruby? Chocolatey enough?"

"Mmm." She sat on his lap, happily slurping her cocoa. He had to hand it to the kid—she bounced back quickly. His spirits sank, realizing how much hope he'd put into Ruby spending time with a woman. Would take some of the pressure off him. Not to mention, he hadn't had more than a minute to himself while Ruby was awake since the day he took custody. If she couldn't handle being with someone as nice as Amy for short periods, what chance did he have at giving her a normal childhood?

Amy began talking about the daily coffee flavors, and they chatted about other changes in the town. Anyone who walked by would think they were having a pleasant visit. A couple of old friends catching up. And he was glad she could be civil, even if they'd never be friends.

By the time they'd all finished their drinks, he didn't know what to do. He hadn't begged for anything since he was a small boy, but thinking about Ruby's future made him desperate enough to contemplate begging Amy to reconsider.

He just wished he had another choice.

\* \* \*

“She's out.”

Amy waited for Nash to join her at his kitchen island. She'd arrived an hour ago, and she'd tried to engage Ruby by asking her about the toys in the living room, but Ruby hadn't seemed interested in them. Only when Nash had suggested watching a Disney movie had Ruby's face lit up. Thankfully, she'd fallen asleep halfway through *Frozen*. Not that Amy had anything against that particular cartoon; it was just hard to be in a family-type environment with Nash, especially given what she needed to ask him.

She needed the full story of Ruby's past.

Her mind had been so preoccupied, she hadn't had time to truly process his gorgeous house or the fact it was exactly the type of home she used to dream about, back when she still had hopes of getting married and having kids of her own. She'd thought she'd be raising a family in a place like this with property not too far from town. She'd thought wrong.

“Are you sure she won't wake up?” She didn't want Ruby to stumble in on them discussing her.

“I don't think she will. She woke up briefly when I pulled the bedspread over her, but I stayed until she fell asleep again.”

One look at his face and all the questions she'd rehearsed earlier vanished. His eyes always changed to gray when he turned melancholy. Seeing the slate shade brought a ping of sadness to her heart. She'd always done her best to soothe his blue moods. But that was then and a lot of life had happened since he'd left. He would have to deal with his moods himself.

“I take it she fell apart when I left her at your apartment earlier.”

“I wouldn't say she fell apart.” Sitting on a stool, she folded her hands on the counter. “It was actually worse than falling apart. I don't know how to describe it except she almost seemed catatonic. It scared me. I didn't know what to do. She was terrified. Couldn't stop staring at the door after you left. Her face turned white. She trembled. When I suggested meeting you at the coffee shop, she finally snapped out of it.”

He frowned. “What did she do then?”

“Tears started falling, but she listened to me and held my hand all the way to The Beanery.”

He drummed his fingers on the counter. “Makes sense in a way.”

“It doesn't to me, and that's why I'm here.” She raised her chin. “I need to know more about her childhood.”

Fear flashed in his eyes.

“I need to know it all.” Amy wasn't backing down on this. Either she had all the facts to come up with a realistic way forward to spend time with Ruby, or she had to walk away.

“You're not going to like it.”

“I'm well aware of that.”

“This needs to stay confidential. I want her to have no baggage in this town. I don't care who knows I'm really her brother raising her as my daughter, but no one needs to know the horror this kid's been through.”

“Agreed. You have my word I will not tell anyone the details you share.”

“I've told you about our mother.” He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning forward. “She went through cycles of heavy drug use and court-mandated rehab. When she was using, she'd do

anything—and I mean anything—to get money for her fix. Prostitution. Theft. You name it. She had no sense of time, no sense of reality. Since Ruby had no father or siblings living with her, the poor kid had to rely on herself when our mother was higher than a kite. Inevitably, our mother would get picked up by the cops and thrown in jail for whatever she was guilty of, and while she served time, Ruby would be placed in foster care. But our mother would get out and she'd be clean, so she'd get custody again until the cycle repeated.”

“How often did this happen?” Amy’s mind was spinning from the scenario. She pictured Ruby small, hungry, scared. She also pictured an unstable drug addict not taking care of the girl.

“Too often.”

What did that mean? Every two months? Once a year? She sighed. It didn’t really matter. “So walk me through the things she had to endure.”

“Being left alone in a filthy apartment with limited food. Could have been a couple hours. Sometimes, I’m sure it was days.”

“Days? But she was practically a baby!” Amy brought her hand to her chest. *Horrible*. “She needed a babysitter. No young child should be left alone in a house for any length of time.”

“Trust me. I know.” He exhaled loudly. “Then there was the fact our mother used around her. Ruby grew up around drug paraphernalia. I guarantee Ruby witnessed her shooting up. I’m sure there was emotional abuse, as well.”

Tears threatened at the thought of sweet Ruby going through all that.

“And this went on her entire life?” Amy sniffed.

“Yes. Up until mid-December at least.”

“If her case workers knew all this, why did they ever let her return to her mother?” The injustice of it made her want to wring someone’s neck.

“They want to keep families together, and they didn’t know all of it.”

If they hadn’t known all of it, and he hadn’t seen his mother in a decade... “How do *you* know this is what happened?”

He bowed his head briefly before meeting her eyes. “From experience.”

It took a few seconds to register, but when it did... She shook her head slightly, her gaze still locked with his. “I see.”

And she did. These new facts sliced open her heart. She’d thought she’d known Nash when they’d dated. She’d always sensed the pain under his easy smile. Understood there were things so awful from his past he might not ever be able to share them. But she hadn’t known this.

“You could have told me,” she said softly. “You know, back then.”

He looked away.

Apparently, he disagreed. She straightened, forcing herself to get her head back to the here and now, not stuck in the way back when.

“Now that I know more about her past, I think she’s terrified of you leaving her.” The more Amy thought about it, the more obvious it became. “She is much more comfortable with me when you’re in the room. But the instant you left today—well, I think she has no idea if she’ll be left by herself, dragged to another home or if she’ll ever see you again. How long have you had custody?”

“A little over a week. But I’ve spent time with her almost every day since December.”

Amy sagged on the stool. She hadn’t realized... No wonder Ruby was so scared. Amy never should have pushed for her own agenda, having Ruby come to her apartment without Nash.

“Well, spending time alone isn’t going to work until it sinks in you will always come back for her.”

“You’re right.” He stretched his head back. “Listen, there are a few other things you should know.”

She braced herself.

“Since she never knew when she’d have food, she hoards it. I find all kinds of snacks in her bedroom. Sometimes under her pillow or stuck in a shoe. And if she wakes up and I’m not around, she screams. Loud. I bought walkie-talkies so I can go outside if she naps, which she doesn’t do very often.”

“That breaks my heart.”

“Mine, too.” He tapped the table, raw honesty pouring from his expression. Then he pointed to the living room. “I bought her all those toys, but she won’t play with them. Barely looks at them.”

“I noticed the same earlier.”

“The therapist told me this is common in severely neglected kids.”

“Will she overcome any of this?” Amy held her breath. *Please let him say yes.*

“Most likely. If she feels secure. That’s why I moved back. Called the pastor when Dottie told me about the mentor program.”

Something in his tone, the dip of his shoulder, clued her into something she’d missed since seeing him again. He didn’t want to be back here. He never would have stepped foot in Sweet Dreams again if it hadn’t been for Ruby.

*Because of me. Because I’m here.*

Her heart hurt all over again. Ten years and the wound hadn’t fully healed.

“All these questions... Does this mean you still want to help her?” The question came unexpectedly, and Amy almost jumped.

Knowing what Nash had told her, did she still want to help Ruby?

*Yes!*

The intensity of the thought surprised her. But she had to protect her heart where Nash was concerned. She couldn’t trust him with it. She might not even be able to trust herself with it. She was willing to take that chance if it meant bringing sunshine to the little girl who’d only known darkness.

“I want to help her. But I think we’re expecting too much of her too soon.”

“What do you suggest?” His eyebrows drew together, and he clasped his hands tightly.

“In the pastor’s office, we all agreed that Ruby’s needs come first, right?”

“Yes,” he practically growled.

“Then you and I are going to have to put aside our issues to let her get used to me.”

“I’m not following.”

“The three of us are going to have to spend time together if Ruby’s ever going to trust me enough to be alone with me.”

He looked nauseous. Irritation flared in her chest. *Welcome to the club, buddy. It isn’t easy for me to be around you, either.*

“You’d really do that...given what I put you through?”

She gave him a firm nod. “Yes. But we need to make it crystal clear to Ruby we are only friends, and there will never, ever be anything romantic between us. I don’t want her to be confused about my role in her life.”

“Of course. Never, ever will there be anything romantic between us.”

“Then we agree.” She should be thankful. But his *never, ever* had been more forceful than hers.

“Agreed.” He rounded the island and stuck out his hand. She placed hers into it, and his rough, warm skin caused the hair on her arms to rise. He smelled familiar, like aftershave and leather. She snatched her hand back.

*Never, ever.*

Wouldn’t be difficult as far as she was concerned.

“For how long?” he asked.

“For as long as it takes.”

[Chapter Four](#)

“I’m going to soak up a few rays while you create your masterpieces. I’ll be sitting out here if you need me.” Nash slid open the patio door while Amy and Ruby dipped paintbrushes into a cup of water. Once he closed the door and sat in a wrought iron chair, he glanced through the glass at Ruby. Her paintbrush was raised and her eyes locked on him. He waved. She didn’t wave back, just resumed sloshing her paintbrush on the paper. A good sign.

The cool wind whooshed under his collar. He welcomed it. Being cooped up indoors had never been his style, and hovering in the kitchen for the previous hour, trying not to notice Amy, had ramped up his nerves. He was still attracted to her. Maybe even more than before. When they’d dated, he’d been young and brash and out to prove something, and now...well, he had nothing left to prove. He’d thought being the best bull rider in the world would wipe away his childhood, make him feel like *somebody*. But rather than giving him an identity, all those championships had merely hammered home the fact he was alone. No loved one to celebrate with. No wife to shower with his financial blessings. As a result, he’d taken more and more risks. And grown hollow inside.

Having Amy around reminded him of the emptiness all too well.

He’d forgotten her rich laugh, the way she always smelled like she’d just baked cookies, the sweet way she had with people. Her patience with Ruby had nearly choked him up earlier. He hadn’t realized how overwhelmed he’d felt since finding out Ruby existed. Only two days had passed since Amy had agreed to mentor Ruby. Once the painting session ended, they would talk to Ruby about Amy’s role in her life. They’d keep it simple.

Although every cell in his body wanted to stand, to pace, to *do something*, he forced himself to sit there for Ruby’s sake. He’d remain where she could see him. Didn’t want her thinking he’d abandoned her or something. Amy’s insight about Ruby being afraid he’d leave made sense. Growing up, how many times had he felt the same?

But sitting still was hard. He longed to check the stalls in the horse barn again. Nothing but the best for his horses. They’d be arriving tomorrow. Most of them were retired rodeo horses he’d purchased over the years from washed-up cowboys no longer able to support noncompeting animals. Nash had been paying Wade to pasture them. In a way, Wade had pastured him, too. For the past decade, one of Wade’s empty guest cottages had been where Nash crashed when not touring. Wade owned a lot of prime land in Wyoming and oversaw a lucrative horse breeding business as well as a cow-calf operation. Wade’s employees took good care of Nash’s horses, and he never worried about them, knowing they were living the good life.

Yesterday he’d organized the tack room, supervised the hay delivery and checked the pasture and fences with Ruby by his side. She liked the outdoors. Acted more like a normal kid outside than in. He’d been the same way.

The sliding door opened, and Amy poked her head out. “We’re done. Come and see Ruby’s picture.”

He pushed himself to stand, wincing as his hips adjusted. His injuries had all healed, but most days his body felt like it belonged to an older person, not to a man in his prime.

“Let’s see what you made, RuRu.” He stopped behind her chair, and she looked over her shoulder at him, hope and fear in her expression. He recognized it well. As a kid, he’d never known when his mother would scream at him for no reason. Living with her had been tumultuous in every way. That’s why he’d been so grateful for Hank, the man who’d introduced him to bull riding. As a kid, Nash had spent his summers traveling to rodeos with the cowboy who’d briefly dated his mother.

“It’s a bunny,” she whispered as her slender shoulders slumped. He frowned. Did she think he’d make fun of her or something?

“I love how you made the bunny blue and purple.” He knelt beside her, kissing her forehead. “You did a bee-yoo-tiful job.”

Her shining eyes met his, and she wrapped her arms around his neck so tightly he almost choked.

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