

## Chapter One

I should have said no.

My arthritic knees told me a storm was coming in, and I dreaded missing my Sunday afternoon nap. But in the end, my Granny-love won out.

I straightened in the saddle as Cricket raced across the hard ground, side-stepping wild scrub bushes and ambling up and down gentle slopes. The untouched land seemed to stretch forever below the cloudless sky—for ten acres, to be exact. And to think this land would finally be transformed into the working horse farm I'd dreamed about for years.

“Hold up, Granny.”

I stopped to allow my fifteen-year-old granddaughter to catch up. Stephanie's long braids bobbed against her back as she urged her horse, Tucker, closer.

“What do you think?” I said. “It's gorgeous, right?”

“It feels like we've totally escaped the real world.”

“And that's a good thing?”

Her enthusiasm boosted my already pumped spirit. Robert and I had put in hours compiling research and creating a humongous to-do list. We had a long journey ahead of us to fulfill our hopes and dreams.

“Where are you going to put things?” Stephanie said. She pointed to the west where a large clump of trees stood tall, their barren branches casting sharply defined shadows across the ground, revealing the approach of winter. “You could dig a pond over there. It would be shady in the summer. And you could build a fire pit with benches around it and maybe even a cabin we could use for camping. I saw one like it the other day on Facebook and took a screenshot. I'll send it to you.”

“Grandpa would love to see it, too.”

“Do you think he might agree?”

“You never know.”

Stephanie pumped her arm in the air. “Too cool. I can't wait to tell Lindsey.”

“How is your friend Lindsey?”

Stephanie tipped her head. “You really want to know?”

“Of course, honey. I know she's not perfect, but I also know you care about her and want to help her.”

“Thanks, Granny.” Stephanie petted Tucker’s neck. “Things have gotten worse lately. This is her senior year, and her dad is all over her to complete college applications. She refuses and won’t even speak to her parents.”

“Does she say why she doesn’t want to fill out the forms?”

“Yeah, it’s the writing—all about why she meets the university’s high standards of excellence and her participation in school and community activities. Duh—that’s just not Lindsey and never has been.”

A strong gust of wind swept through, carrying bits of dead twigs and leaves. Stephanie fished a sock cap from her coat pocket and pulled it on her head. “Lindsey refuses to be a fake and make herself look like some model student when she knows, straight up, she’s trouble waiting to happen. She’s so sick of adults telling her what she ought to do with her life and not listening to what she wants to do. If she were applying to an art school instead of engineering, I’ll bet the forms would already be signed and delivered.”

I wished I had advice to offer, but I didn’t. Lindsey had not been a positive influence on Stephanie in the past year. In fact, it was quite the opposite. “Did you suggest Lindsey could major in business like her father wants and still minor in art and design?”

“I did, and her father approved the idea, but Lindsey feels like the compromise is unfair since she would have to do the work and has no desire to earn a business degree.”

“Makes sense,” I said.

Cricket danced in place as if spooked by the whistling wind, anxious to move forward. “Whoa, boy.” I gently tugged on the reins until Cricket turned his head to the right, toward his tail. After a few seconds, I repeated the process to the left. When finished, Cricket instinctively dropped his head, and his body relaxed.

“We’d better get back,” I said. “You’ve got school tomorrow, and we still need to rub the horses down and feed them.” I zipped my jacket and pulled my hood up. I was proud of my Stephanie, even if she did keep the family hopping with her headstrong personality. What could I say? She was my mini-me. But I had to wonder how long it would take for Lindsey Dempsey to pull Stephanie down to her level.



Stephanie’s mom pulled into the drive just as Stephanie and I finished tending to the horses. Vickie’s long Raggedy-Ann-red hair shot out in all directions when she stepped from the car. She harnessed it and held it in a bunch to one side. “Did you have a good time, Stephanie?”

Stephanie frowned. “Why did you come so soon, Mom? I wanted to play Monopoly with Grandpa. Can Granny bring me home later?”

I pushed her forward. “Not this time. It’s getting dark, and I haven’t even thought about what to fix for supper.”

Stephanie spread her feet. “I fix awesome grilled cheese sandwiches.” She turned to Vickie. “Please, Mom?”

Vickie’s lips froze in a tight smile, her forehead creased. I wasn’t surprised. A day rarely went by that Stephanie didn’t push her limits, especially with Vickie.

I could say a lot more but I’d crossed this bridge before, and Robby and Vickie had made it irrevocably clear that my opinion was neither helpful nor welcome. Nevertheless, when Vickie climbed into the car and closed the door, I suspected she was giving me unspoken permission to interfere, just this once.

“Get in the car right now, Stephanie.”

Stephanie looked my way, her eyes wide.

I raised my eyebrows. “If you’re going to argue with your parents when they pick you up, don’t expect me to agree the next time you want to visit.”

She stood there for a nano-second—in shock, I think—then opened the car door.

“No smart mouth on the way home, either.”

Vickie backed the car to turn around in the driveway and tipped her head slightly as she passed. All was good.



Glancing through the window, I saw Robert had logs burning in the fireplace. We’d only moved to the country a few months ago, so this was our first spell of cold weather. I paused to savor the musky scent of burning wood. Smoke spiraled from our chimney, a ghostly white against the darkening sky. For so many years, this was exactly the way I’d pictured living in this house.

Childhood memories surfaced, and I had to swallow hard to keep distressful emotions from overshadowing my joy. As I climbed the steps to the back door, I intentionally focused on the beauty of the evening. There would be a time to deal with painful remnants of the past, but this wasn’t it. Tonight would be about celebrating what God was doing in our home—our empty nest—and in our marriage. And maybe a bit of meaningful activity in front of the fireplace.



Monday morning, November 6. The day had been circled in red on my calendar for months. Today we would meet with a contractor to set in motion the dream for our farm—a non-profit equestrian therapy center where we could minister to abused teen girls.

Heat filled my cheeks as I pulled a baggy red sweatshirt over my head. I cracked the bedroom window to catch a breath of frosty air.

Alluring whiffs of bacon and fried eggs wafted up the stairs, causing my stomach to growl as I pulled the bed covers up and tidied the room. Robert and I were headed into Indy after breakfast to meet with a contractor. I hurried downstairs.

“Holy cow,” I said. “What have you done?”

Robert stood tall. He had spread a white linen cloth over the kitchen table, placed a single red rose in a crystal vase, and arranged our good silver on cloth napkins.

He pulled me into his arms. “This is your day, honey.”

Oh, how I wanted to relax in my husband’s arms and share the joy of this milestone in our lives. But emotionally, it just wasn’t happening.

Instead, Robert’s touch evoked troubling memories—hidden baggage uncovered just days ago when I received a letter from Danny Cooke, the first boy I had ever loved.

Four months ago, Danny had been killed in a tragic plane crash along with his wife. The pilot—their son Graham—survived.

I grieved Danny’s loss, though we hadn’t been in touch since I was fifteen. Danny was three years older and had lived on a farm adjacent to mine. We spent hours together as young teens, riding horses, playing cards, and doing our homework together in the shade of the barn. We told each other everything, even to the point where Danny revealed his attraction to Marjorie, a classmate.

Somewhere in the span of time since I’d last seen Danny, he wrote me a letter and made arrangements for it to be delivered promptly if he should precede me in death. The letter arrived a few weeks ago.

Danny and Marjorie’s untimely deaths hit me hard, but having Danny’s words reach out to me from the grave took my breath away. Time seemed to stand still as I tried to reconcile the past with the present. In his letter, Danny said he had loved me all these years. His words made me wonder if I had ever stopped loving him?

The answer came quickly. Though interlaced with anger and regret after forty years of separation and silence, that young love remained. Danny's written words punctured the hardened surface of my soul, and deep feelings flowed freely without restraint . . . or control.

Robert and I had read Danny's letter together. Robert held me as I cried, trying to absorb Danny's words. But wrapped in my husband's arms, I had to wonder how Robert could possibly deal with the shrouded love his wife felt for another man. Another man who, though deceased, was very much alive in her heart.

So I kept my feelings close to my chest after that day, and Robert didn't question my silence.

Now, everything in me wanted to push Robert away. I wanted to be alone to process these feelings. How could Robert ever understand the intense longing in my heart to melt into Danny Cooke's open arms one more time? To hear Danny's gentle words of affirmation and affection. To spend time together just hanging out.

Oblivious to my quandary, Robert pulled out my chair. "Be seated, my queen."

I smiled and sat, unable to speak even a simple word of thanks—so repulsed was I by Robert's jovial mood. How could I celebrate when my heart ached for something I could never have? Fortunately, Robert was too busy dishing up my breakfast to notice.

My Robert. I loved him from the bottom of my heart—no question, there. Granted, our thirty-seven years of marriage had been a series of dips and turns, but we were on track now and headed in the right direction.

That is, we were before Danny Cooke unexpectedly intruded on our sacred union. Now there were three people in the relationship, and it was up to me to do something about it.