



Chapter Two

Kayla hit “send” on a quick text to Cody before the family limousine left the cemetery.

I’m not sure what the GPS will say. Turn between Phillips 66 and Toot and Moo. Follow the dirt road and turn left at the shoe tree.

She watched as he looked down at his phone, then waved. Even from here she could see the smile on his face. Why was she not ready for him to go home? Inviting him to join the family after the service just seemed natural. Would he be uncomfortable and embarrassed?

Everyone in the car stared out a window as they traveled the rough road to Coach and Zanna’s house. Kayla was not surprised at the lack of conversation. There wasn’t much left to say.

“Everyone’s coming inside, right?” Coach turned around from the seat next to the driver. “The ladies of our church have been cooking for a couple of days.”

“We wouldn’t want to turn down their hospitality.” Uncle Smiley squeezed her hand.

“I can’t stay long.” Faith spoke up from Kayla’s other side. “John K. will be leaving for work soon, and I won’t see him again until Saturday night at the rodeo.”

“That’s right. Our two princesses are making an appearance this weekend.” Granny leaned forward to touch her shoulder.

“Kayla is the only one with any official duties. I’m just a tagalong.” Faith winked.

“Couldn’t do it without you.” Kayla leaned against Faith’s shoulder.

The driver stopped near the end of the ramp leading to the front porch and jumped out to open the limo doors.

“We made it through, Kayla Grace.” Uncle Smiley whispered in her ear as they exited the car.

“One step at a time.” Kayla hugged him and noticed Cody’s truck pulling up nearby. “I invited Cody Billings to join us. I hope that’s okay.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. Your grandpa said there would be plenty of food.” He walked with her to the driver’s side of Cody’s truck. “Good to see you, young man.” He reached to shake Cody’s hand.

“You, too, sir.”

“Come on in. We’ll grab a plate of food and come back outside.” Kayla pointed at the large tables overlooking the front yard.

Several vehicles filled the small parking area, and family members surrounded them, greeting each other quietly.

Zanna followed Coach up the ramp.

“Your directions were perfect.” Cody waited at the bottom of the ramp. “The GPS didn’t say anything about Toot and Moo or a shoe tree.”

“I guess that did sound kind of strange. I don’t give them a second thought.” Kayla fidgeted with the clutch bag she’d brought to hold tissues. “I’m more at home here than at my own house.”

"It's a great place." Cody turned toward the long hillside leading down to the freeway. "Terrific view."

"You should see the back side of the property." She pointed behind the barn. "That actually looks down to the river."

"I love being close to the water. I'd love to see that sometime." He moved ahead up the ramp, and she followed.

"Come on, Kayla." Her cousin Jeremy held the screen door open as they entered the house. "Ms. Ellen brought her chocolate pie. It may already be gone."

"An older version of Junior Caldwell." Cody laughed.

"Yep. It's always all about dessert." Kayla found each of them a plate. "But that pie really is special. Ms. Ellen is Zanna's best friend. You'll meet her, I'm sure."

In no time, their plates were full. Kayla followed Cody past Uncle Smiley, who seated himself in a living room chair next to Coach. "Kayla has inherited one of the biggest operations in Big River county. I'm super grateful that Rod and Nancy Hernandez are there to keep things running."

Kayla balanced both her and Cody's plates as they headed down the ramp to the picnic table. Luckily, the trees in the yard protected them from the Arkansas sun.

She'd never thought about how big her parents' ranch was. Especially since Dad had stopped supplying stock for the Crossroads rodeo and sold several acres. Would Rod and Nancy start coming to her for decisions about the business now? How involved would Uncle Smiley be?

"You okay?" Cody's nose wrinkled with concern as she set their plates on the table.

"Yeah." She tried to paste on her smile again. "Thanks again for being here."

"No problem." He handed her a rolled napkin that contained her silverware. "Your mom's side of the family is big, but they all seem nice."

"Between these cousins and my Caldwell cousins, I had lots

of fun, even as an only child.” Kayla left the bundle of silverware beside her plate. “I know one thing, though. If I ever have kids, there will be more than one.”

“There are pluses and minuses. I’ve been the only one since my two brothers got married.” He picked up a yeast roll. “Sometimes, I get too much attention at home.” His face dropped. “That probably sounds like a stupid thing to say.”

“No, I understand.” Kayla fiddled with her napkin. “I’m sure there will be lonely times, but I haven’t had much time to miss the attention from my parents yet.”

“What are you two drinking?” Zanna’s friend Ellen walked up with a tray full of glasses, a pitcher of tea and one of lemonade.

“Lemonade for me.” Kayla stood to help steady the tray as Ellen poured. “Ellen Withers, this is my friend Cody from Crossroads.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am. And Lemonade sounds great.” Cody held his hand out. Ellen placed a cold glass in it.

“You’re very welcome.” Ellen nodded at Cody, and then whispered in Kayla’s ear. “I sent your Zanna to her room. She is awfully tired. You might go check on her in a minute.”

Kayla nodded. She hoped that staying here for a few days wouldn’t be a strain on Zanna. She had enough to do keeping this place running.

Before they’d finished eating, her grandpa and Cody were locked in conversation. She collected Cody’s plate and carried it inside with hers as the two men traveled down the paved pathways leading to each of Coach’s current projects.

The dim light of the living area caused her to blink. Now that the memorial services were over, a new set of problems loomed. Would she be expected to take on the running of a ranch along with checking on her grandparents? What would happen when it was time to go back to Fayetteville for school? Maybe, instead of traveling to Fort Smith and other rodeos in the next few weeks, she should stick closer to home. It was all too much to think

about. She blinked back tears. If only she could ask Mom and Dad what to do.

Kayla pushed the bedroom door open. “How you doing, Zanna?” Zanna sat on the side of the chenille-covered bed, slipping off her shoes.

“Oh, I’m okay. Come sit with me, sweetie.” Zanna patted the bedspread next to her. “I guess Ms. Ellen sent you to check on me.”

“She’s a good friend.” Kayla linked elbows with her grandma.

“Yes ma’am. We’re fortunate to have her.” Zanna turned to face her. “And it looks like you’re making a new friend too. Young Mr. Billings, isn’t it?”

“I’ve known him I guess my whole life. He and his brothers live behind Uncle Smiley, on the other side of the hill, but he was a grade behind me in school, so we didn’t spend much time together.” Kayla’s cheeks warmed. She hadn’t stopped to think about how things seemed to be changing between her and Cody. Apparently, other people were noticing.

“You need to go back and make him feel welcome. You and Ms. Ellen both know it only takes me a few minutes of being still to recharge my batteries.” Zanna moved over on the bed, stretching her stockinged feet out while she reclined on the pile of throw pillows.

“I think Coach is showing him around his gardens.” Kayla tucked a light blanket over her grandma. “I’ll see you soon.” She leaned over to kiss Zanna’s forehead.

From the front porch, she saw Coach and Cody buzzing around the paved pathways in the side yard. Helping Coach plan his garden had inspired her to make things easier for folks who needed help walking.

“Did you tell me your new fella was a rancher?” Coach asked as they stopped in front of her.

Cody blinked.

“Uh ...” Cody hesitated.

“Cody’s a friend from the ranch behind ours.” Kayla blushed. Just like Coach to jump to conclusions.

“And certainly not the rancher Kayla’s dad was,” Cody said.

“That’s more animals than I want to put up with,” Coach said. “I’ll stick with my vegetables any day.”

“Thanks for showing me around, Mr. Pruitt.” Cody reached to shake Coach’s hand. “I guess it’s time for me to head back to Big River County.”

“It was a pleasure, son. Come back and see us again.” Coach patted Cody’s shoulder.

“I’ll walk you to your truck.” Kayla followed as Cody headed to the other side of the driveway. It would take him a while to reach his home, but she wasn’t excited about saying goodbye.

“Thanks for inviting me over.” Cody stopped behind his truck. “I’m sure your family wants to spend more time with you tonight.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Kayla stood with her hands folded in front of her. “Sorry about Coach’s comment.”

“Hey. I’ve been called worse than ‘new fella.’” Cody reached up to grab the loader in the bed of his truck. “I’ll see you at the rodeo in Fort Smith, this weekend.”

“You’ll be there to watch your brother in the tie-down competition, right?” She moved closer to him.

“Yep. I hope he and his horse are ready for this. They’ve been to a few smaller rodeos, but this is a pretty big deal.”

“I’ll be busy at the pageant. Hopefully, I won’t have a lot to do at the rodeo after the grand entry. I’ll try to find you.” Kayla bit her lip. She would have to start giving the pageant more thought soon. Getting these two memorial services behind her had occupied all her time for days. She could have easily opted out of crowning the new queen for Rodeo Arkansas Teen, but participating might bring her closer to normal.

“This year’s winner will have some big boots to fill,” Cody said.

“Not that big ...” Kayla lifted one of her feet in front of her.

“You know what I mean. We were all proud when you won last year.” His cheeks turned a funny shade of pink.

“Thanks. I’ve enjoyed it. I’m just glad Faith is still around to help me with this pageant and the summer appearances. I don’t know what I’ll do when she gets busy with nurse’s training this fall.” It was hard to think beyond a few days out.

“And you’ll be back in Fayetteville then, too, right?” Cody ran his hands through his hair.

“Yes. I don’t think there will be as much to do for Rodeo Arkansas Teen after school starts. Then, the new queen will take over at the first of the year.” She caught a bead of perspiration as it ran down the side of her face.

“If there’s anything I’ve learned, it’s not to get too far ahead of yourself.” He rolled back and forth in front of her. “One day at a time is enough.”

“For real. Thanks for coming today.” She smiled. “I appreciate you being here.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you again soon.”

In just a matter of a minute or so, Cody was seated behind the wheel of his pickup truck.

A warm breeze toyed with the hem of her dress. She held it with one hand and waved with the other. Time to get out of this funeral outfit and into something more relaxing. The few days of peace she planned to share with Coach and Zanna would pass all too quickly.

Cody watched Kayla’s reflection grow smaller as he traveled down the long road behind her grandparents’ house. Sneakers of every description waved in the breeze as he approached the ‘shoe tree’ that marked his next turn. He chuckled. Growing up, that tree had probably never pictured itself looking like this. But it had become an important part of the landscape around here.

What had Kayla said about the view from the back side of

her grandparents' property? He turned left instead of heading back to the freeway. He was always up for a view of the river.

Mailboxes were less frequent, and the road became narrower. A sign reading "Overlook" popped up on his left just before another one announcing a "Dead End." He slowed and turned to find a wide paved area marked with a few parking spaces. One was marked for handicap access, so he pulled in and stopped.

Ahead, the trees had been cleared out, so he could tell there would be a nice view. He opened his door and operated the controls to bring his wheelchair to his side. There wasn't much time before dark, but he sensed this stop might be worth it.

After he was securely seated and his truck was locked, he motored around the back of the pickup, facing a rocky hillside leading down to the river. He shielded his eyes from the bright sunlight coming from the west. The wide channel of the river below him marked it as the Arkansas. Birds sailed gracefully on the wind currents, and a few called up at him from trees below.

A shiny white object caught his eye, and the faint chugging of a barge reached his ears. From behind several rows of massive steel bars, a white tugboat bravely pushed the tremendous load down the river toward Little Rock. He'd need to check out a map to see how near they were to the lock and dam. Watching these monsters navigate through that channel had fascinated him since he was small. He'd even thought about working on one of these boats someday.

His pocket buzzed with a phone notification. Mom.

"Hi." He was glad she hadn't tried to reach him while he was driving.

"How was the service?"

Always hard to answer a question like that.

"Fine. Kayla's folks had lots of friends and family up here."

"Are you and Junior headed back? I want to have plenty for supper." She knew Junior. That would require more than one extra helping of whatever she was fixing.

“Junior went home with his sister. I stayed to visit with Kayla’s other grandparents for a minute.”

“Okay. I just checked the forecast. Looks like the rain will hold off until tomorrow. Be careful, sweetheart. See you when you get home.”

“Bye, Mom.”

He stowed his phone in his jacket pocket and headed back to the pickup. Mom was always concerned about him, but maybe a little more since his accident. She had acted the same way when John K. came home from the Middle East.

Middle brother O.D. was the only one who usually avoided being coddled. Good old O.D. had always been the one his parents depended on. Cody was grateful for the support his parents had provided after his bull wreck. Would they ever let him grow up?

Back on the main road, the miles clipped by. The exit that led to the family’s hunting cabin was next up. Why not? He flipped on the right turn signal and glided off the interstate toward the two-lane road. This wouldn’t add too many minutes.

By the time he reached his next turn, he had met only a few cars. The sun was lower in the sky to the west, and he left his window down, hoping for a breeze. The pine trees crowded both sides of the road, forming a canopy over the truck.

He took a deep breath as he turned off the pavement. The mailbox he’d helped Dad install marked the wide driveway. The cabin itself had changed since his growing up days. John K. had done a great job supervising the remodel that had been necessary after a freak hot water heater explosion.

Cody stopped his truck in its regular spot, and he unloaded his chair. Might as well run in and look around, maybe even use the bathroom. He’d been so pleased about the new ramp on the front porch. Another indication of how much his family cared for him.

Inside, he spun around in the big open living area. John K. had lived here for a while and had done fine. Was that a

possibility for Cody too? He poked his head into the bedroom and bathroom. Everything looked ready for a new resident.

With the front door relocked, he headed back to his truck. There was really no reason for him to leave home. But this would be the perfect place to prove he could manage on his own. It was worth considering.