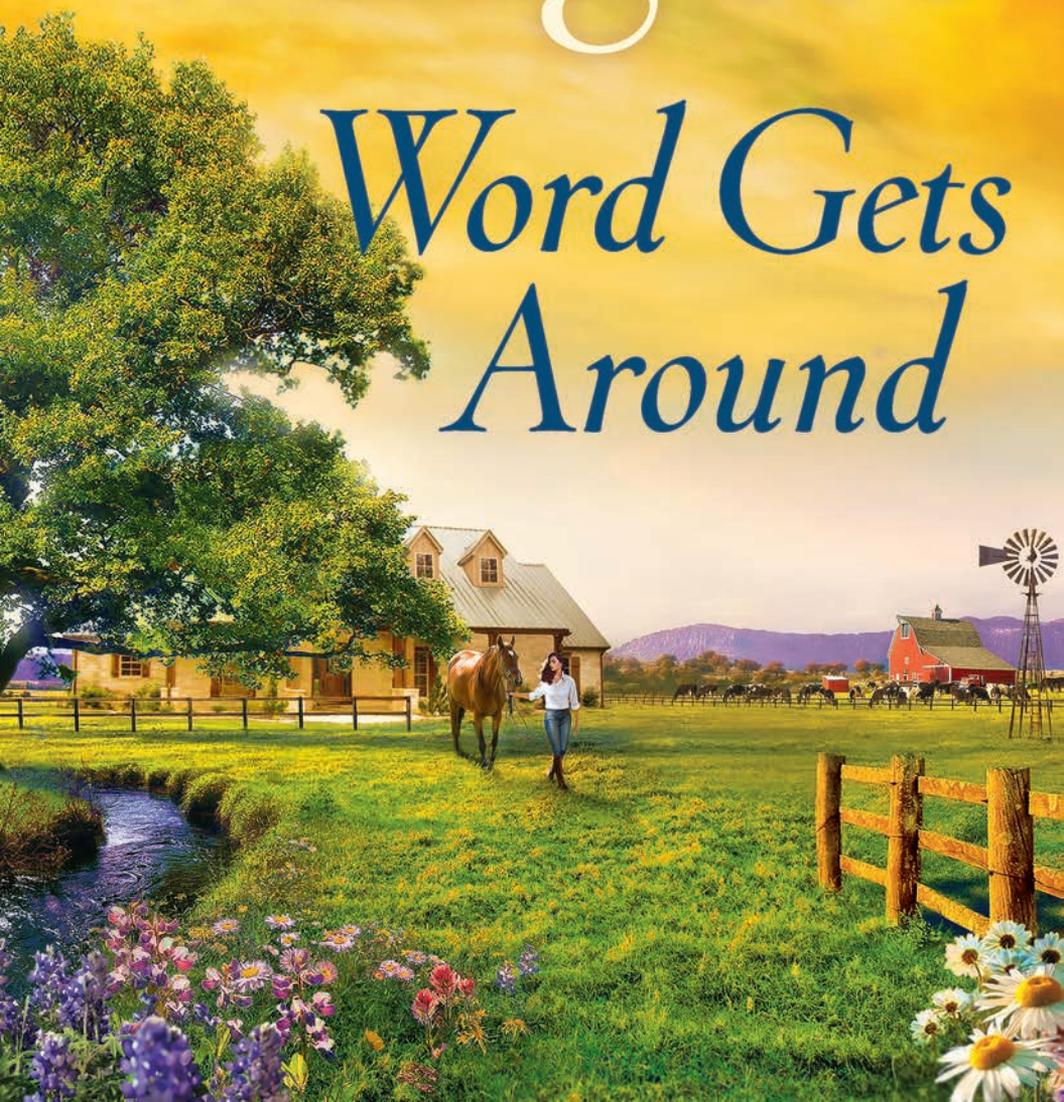


*New York Times* Bestselling Author

Lisa  
Wingate

*Word Gets  
Around*



## Praise for *Word Gets Around*

“Wingate’s sweet writing style incorporates the best of romance, friendship and small-town life. The characters resound with down-home charm and light up the pages with touching spiritual insight.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“Each character is lovingly crafted. . . . Wingate’s idyllic small-town atmosphere in this sweet romance makes for a charming read.”

—*Booklist*

## Praise for Lisa Wingate’s Novels

“Full of suspense, mystery, and romance, *Wildwood Creek* is a must read.”

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“Versatile and prolific Wingate weaves a story of deception, secrecy, and scandal. . . . fans of women’s fiction will find this novel . . . deeply satisfying.”

—*Booklist* on *Firefly Island*

“Wingate pens a light and entertaining story of life in a small town with Texas-sized charm.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Talk of the Town*

Bethany House Books by Lisa Wingate

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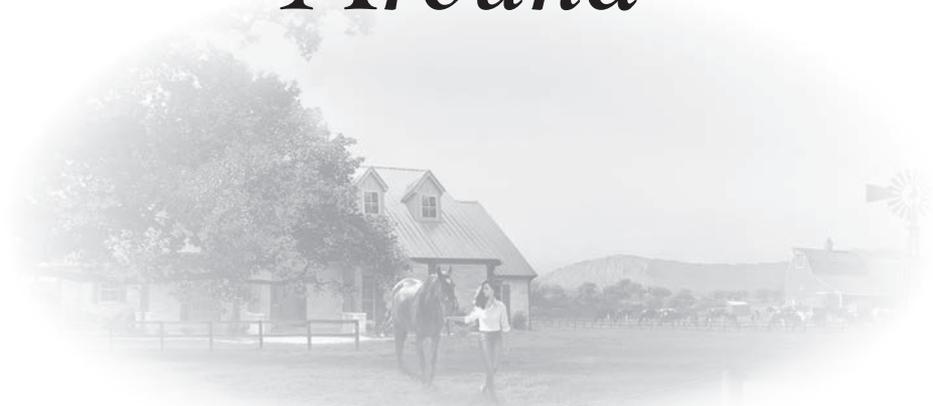
DAILY, TEXAS

*Talk of the Town*  
*Word Gets Around*  
*Never Say Never*

MOSES LAKE

*Larkspur Cove*  
*Blue Moon Bay*  
*Firefly Island*  
*Wildwood Creek*

# Word Gets Around



# Lisa Wingate



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For my two small-town boys  
who know that moms (and writers) need quiet time,  
and that trips to town to deliver forgotten ball gloves,  
left-behind track shoes, lost band instruments,  
and trash bags full of sweaty football pads  
are a great way to get it.  
Thanks for looking after my peace of mind,  
and for making every day an adventure.  
What a blessing!

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## Chapter 1

# *Lauren Eldridge*

They say you can't go home again, but the truth is, if you're a small-town Texas girl, you can never really leave. The town travels with you like an extra layer of skin—something flamboyant and tight fitting. Even though you may hide it beneath the trappings of sophistication, it's right there under your clothes, your secret identity. Whether you admit it or not, you have an affinity for big hair, shirts with pearl snaps, cowboy boots, and faded blue jeans. Even in the most upscale restaurants, you secretly search the menu for comfort foods like chicken-fried steak and catfish, especially on Fridays. Any Texas girl knows it's not Friday without all-you-can-eat catfish.

The world would be better off if everyone ate fried food at least one night a week, and drank coffee you could cut with a knife, and lingered with their neighbors. We'd understand each other a little better, and maybe we'd understand ourselves. Perhaps we'd ponder, over the plastic basket with the grease-stained tissue paper, the need to run so far, so fast—to have, to do, to achieve, to gain, to win—to be *all that* and make sure

everybody knows it. A pecan pie does not toil, nor does it spin, but it sure tastes good, and it makes a fine conversation piece.

In the right setting, you can talk for twenty minutes about the merits of a good pecan pie. You can discuss the pecans—paper shell, Stuart, native, chopped, broken, whole. You can talk about the fact that farm-fresh eggs make a better pie than store-bought. You can theorize as to why that might be. One thing that’s wrong with society today—too many chemically altered chickens living in giant egg factories, toiling mindlessly, uninspired by their work.

There’s a whole world out there that doesn’t know one egg from another, and for some reason, that world had always held an attraction for me. My limited contact with the strange and wondrous realms outside our little town of Daily, Texas, was the subject of my earliest childhood fascinations. That world seemed like the place to be, even when I was too young to understand it.

In the farthest reaches of my memory, there are hippies. They’re sitting on a street corner in Los Angeles, shaking tambourines, playing guitars, railing against nukes and advocating love. It’s a nice song, I think, and I’m enthralled by their swinging leather fringes, and the fact that they’re dancing half-naked on the sidewalk. We don’t see things like that back home in Daily, Texas.

Aunt Donetta grabs my hand and drags me across the street and we go find my father, who is delivering a herd of our ranch horses to their winter jobs at a movie studio. The horses have been ferrying city kids and troops of Girl Scouts out at Boggy Bend Park all summer, so they’re *dog gentle*, says my father as he and the studio wrangler, Willie Wardlaw, watch the herd exit the trailer and blink in the bright California sunlight. The wrangler, my dad’s old rodeo buddy, laughs. “Just because Girl

Scouts can handle them horses don't mean movie actors can," he says.

Standing there in my new pink cowgirl suit, proudly wearing my latest goat slapping championship belt buckle, I catalog that information in my six-year-old brain. Movie actors are worse horse riders than Girl Scouts. Even at six years old, I have suspected as much from watching TV westerns, but my theory is confirmed when Willie grins and says, "You know they only ride for the camera. Other than that, not a one of 'em knows the head from the hind end."

Then Willie walks away with his clipboard, leaving me to fret about abandoning our remuda in movie land. I've been worried about this all along, because the horses are my personal friends and favorite playmates, except in the summer, when the campground at Boggy Bend fills with yammering city kids who are fun to play kickball with, but painfully ignorant about horses.

I cling to my father's assurance that he has a *sweet deal* worked out to lease our horses for the winter, then bring them back to Daily in time for summer campers. He cannot believe the amount a movie studio is willing to pay for this. It's well worth the long haul from Texas in the rebuilt Ford pickup he has lovingly pieced together from spare parts.

Aunt Donetta isn't worried about the paycheck or the horses, but she does have something on her mind. She tells my father about the dangerous hippies in the street. They're everywhere—singing, carrying anti-government signs, smoking and being s-e-x-u-a-l (she spells this word then blushes) in public. Los Angeles is one big, full-scale hippie convention. "It's hardly a proper place for an impressionable child," she says and frowns because, thanks to my father's part-time rodeo affliction, my brother, Kemp, and I are often in improper places. We love those places, but Aunt Donetta feels the need to protect us, being as

we have no mother to do it. She demands that my father take us home to Texas *immediately*. No—she does not want to see Hollywood Boulevard or Grauman’s Chinese Theatre.

Our trip to California is ruined. Daddy and Aunt Donetta pack my little brother and me into the truck and we head home, and I never go back to California again, even though my dad helps support his rodeo habit for years by supplying Willie Wardlaw with movie horses. In fact, our existence is all about horses. My father is certain that, since Kemp’s only interest is sports, I’ll be the one to take over the ranch, eventually.

The day I gave up horses for a graduate teaching assistantship at Kansas State University and left Daily, Texas, for good became the biggest disappointment of my father’s life. At twenty-nine, I needed a clean break from the hometown, and even though my father knew the reasons, my leaving was hard for him to accept. For two years afterward, he pretended he didn’t have a clue *what* I was doing, *way up north* in Kansas.

When he finally managed to navigate the university phone system and call my office, I knew something big was up.

“Hey-uh, Puggy, what ya doin’?” My father has forever insisted on calling me *Puggy*, despite the implied unattractiveness of it. In my family, you’re saddled with a nickname the minute enough relatives make it to the hospital to establish a quorum. After that, you’re stuck with it. My name is Lauren, but to my dad, I am forever *Puggy*.

“Eating a breakfast taco and grading anatomy finals,” I replied. “It’s always entertaining. I wonder if some of these kids ever come to class. If they did, they’d know that a fracture of the first phalanx in a racing greyhound would be in the foot, not the mouth. We tried offering an anatomy course in summer minimester this year, but it’s looking like it was a mistake.”

“I read where kids startin’ college are even dumber than

we used to be.” Dad seemed surprisingly willing to talk about campus life. This was a first. Normally when I brought it up, he changed the subject. “Them SAT scores are down three percentile points overall. Read it in the *Wall Street Journal*.”

*The Wall Street Journal*? *My dad*? “Well, it’s a good thing the *Wall Street Journal* is not here grading these tests, because this kid has the jawbone connected to the leg bone.”

Dad hooted as though I’d said something hilarious. “Wooh-wee, that’d be interesting, now wouldn’t it? Don’t reckon that dog’d hunt. I took anatomy once. Don’t remember much. Think that mighta been the year I broke my shoulder.” It was a well-known fact that my father’s undergraduate career involved more college rodeo than actual coursework. When he broke his shoulder and couldn’t continue to compete, he quit school, went home to Daily to work in my grandfather’s auto shop, and never returned to academic life. According to him, it was probably for the best.

“So, how’s the teachin’ business?”

“It’s fine, Dad. It’s good. I’m a little behind in getting some things graded. I’ll catch up now that the minimester course is over.” Ah, heaven—the lazy hours of midsummer, when the campus was quiet and the student population reduced by half.

“Got a lot to do this weekend?”

“A bit, but I’ll get it finished. We’re off tomorrow, so it’s a long weekend for us, and I’m not teaching anything else this summer, which means I don’t have to prep until closer to fall.” Something began to needle the back of my mind. These were strange questions, coming from my father. Dad didn’t like to talk on the phone. When he did call, we conversed about ranch business, or the latest happenings in Daily, or how my brother, Kemp, was doing now that he’d moved home and taken a coaching job at Daily High. “What’s up, Dad?”

“Well, nothin’, nothin’ . . .” His pregnant pause shifted my attention from the anatomy test to the conversation.

“Dad, is something wrong?”

“Well, no. No, a’course not.” He diverted the dialogue with a short dissertation about a local girl having made it big in a TV-show talent competition a few months ago. Amber Anderson’s second-place finish on *American Megastar* last April was the biggest thing to hit Daily, Texas, in years. Aunt Donetta made sure I tuned in for the big Hometown Reveal segment, when Amber was announced as a finalist. It was strange, seeing Daily on the screen—all the familiar places, all the same people. The town seemed to have remained frozen in time during the two years I’d been away. Watching Amber’s hometown show, I basked in the transient warmth of memories. And then, during a scene at the rodeo arena, completely without warning, there was a big roan horse with a Hash-3 brand on its hip. I remembered the day the horse was born. I remembered Danny and me helping it into the world. I remembered when the Hash-3 was the two of us—young, married, living in a crumbling ranch house on the back side of my father’s place, with a mile-high stack of impractical dreams.

The history of that life, and its abrupt and painful ending, had flashed through my mind, and I couldn’t breathe. My body felt heavy and numb. I turned off the TV, walked to the bedroom, crawled into bed, and cried until I fell asleep. The next day, I called in sick and let another GA teach my classes. I was careful not to turn on week two of the *American Megastar* finals. . . .

Dad’s voice brought me back to the present. “So, anyhow. You’ll never guess who’s here. Ol’ Willie Wardlaw. You remember him? You met him when you was just little. Remember? The year you and Aunt Netta rode along to deliver the horses at the movie studio?”

*Ab, the infamous year of the hippies.* “Sure, of course I remember.” My one and only Hollywood experience, when I didn’t get to meet either Mickey Mouse or the cast of *Little House on the Prairie*—my two fantasies at the time. “Wow, that’s something. I didn’t know you two kept in touch anymore.”

“Well, we hadn’t talked in a while. Few years. Boy, between the movie business and race horses, Willie’s kept busy. All that time when we was bringin’ him our park horses, he was charging the studio *four times* the lease fee he paid us per animal. Old scoundrel. And here I thought we was gettin’ rich. You should see the pictures of this place he runs out in California. It’s like the Tash-mer-hall for horses—thirty-stall barn, all the pastures mowed like golf course lawns, exercise track with a startin’ gate, white fence runnin’ as far as the eye can see. Got an indoor workout arena, too. Air-conditioned. I mean, Willie’s got hisself a horseman’s heaven.”

*Well, that’s it. Dad’s moving to California to train racehorses with Willie. He’s trying to break it to me gently.* “It sounds wonderful, Dad. I’m glad you and Willie are having a good visit. What’s he doing in Texas, anyway?” *In Daily, of all places.*

My father went right on talking. “Yeah, old Willie’s done good. Stands some big time runnin’ horses at stud, right there on the place. Got three hot walkers, and a full-size arena out back. Keeps horses for some movie stars, too. Lord a’mercy, these pictures got girls ridin’ in bikini bathing suits. Willie’s got him a cute little girlfriend, too. She’s upstairs gettin’ ready to go to breakfast at the cafe. Wooh-wee, Daily ain’t ever seen anything like her, I’ll tell you. She dresses like that Pamela Hilton.”

“Paris Hilton?”

“Yeah, her.”

*Dad has fallen for Willie’s Malibu Barbie girlfriend. He’s*

headed to California to find one of his own. That's why it's him calling, not Aunt Donetta. She's too mad to talk. "Well, now there's a picture." Paris Hilton on the streets of Daily. Look out. "Has Aunt Donetta seen her yet?"

"Oh, you bet. This afternoon, Aunt Netta's gonna take her down to Boggy Bend to get some sun at the RV park pool."

*Aunt Donetta is hanging out with Willie's bikini-babe girlfriend. At the Boggy Bend RV park. Wonder if Paris knows that, by swimming pool, they mean a hollowed-out section of the creek with bluegill, perch, and an occasional diamondback water snake living in it. The first time a fish nips her toes, she'll freak. "That's nice."*

"Yeah. Willie and me have some business to tend to. He's got a heck of a sweet deal goin' on right now. Willie's the wrangler for that new movie they're makin' from that book that was on *Good Mornin' America* a few years back. You remember—*The Horseman*?" Dad lowered his voice, saying the title as if he, himself, were the show's announcer. "Remember how right after that book come out, all that horse whisperin' was a big deal? Every yay-hoo around was gonna be a horse whisperer, like the fella in the book. Anyhow, now Willie's got the contract to do all the horse wranglin' for the movie. Big job for one man."

*My father has gone Hollywood. He's hiring on with Willie Wardlaw to help make The Horseman. Willie will rent him out for four times what Dad's getting paid. "Sounds like it," I agreed.*

"It'll be worth the work, though. This thing's gonna go all the way to the A-cademy A-wards, I'll guar-own-tee. They're gonna make it sure-enough authentic—change it up a little from the book, make the horseman a little older, so it'll be believable that he'd have all them insights about horses and people."

*My father has been asked to play the horseman. He's going*

*to be a movie star at sixty-six.* “That makes sense. Sounds exciting, Dad. I bet it’ll be a big success.”

“Sure is. They got star power, too—that there Justin . . . uhhh . . . Justin . . . well, you know, that there Justin fella that’s so famous. The fella Amber Anderson got to be friends with while she was in California singin’ on *American Megastar*. Justin . . .”

“Shay?”

“Yeah, sure, that’s him. Justin Shay. Willie says he’ll be good for the part. He’s real popular. Just needs a little coaching in the horse whisperin’ end of it.”

*My father is going to train the Hollywood horse whisperer—Justin Shay, pop-action-thriller star who undoubtedly doesn’t know one end of a horse from the other. I’m offended. For years, I tried to bring my father in tune with modern, kinder, gentler methods of training horses. He had no interest. He wanted to do things the old-fashioned way. “A horse ain’t broke until you break it,” he’d say.*

“Well, Dad, there are definitely some things to know about resistance-free training. It isn’t all intuitive, even for people who have been around animals all their lives. You have to understand why the animal does what it does—what the body language means and what actions on the part of the trainer cause those reactions. It’s all about action and reaction.”

“Exactly. That’s right. See, you know all them modern terms for that stuff. Back in my day, we just put a horse in the pen and got him broke, but now everyone’s gotta whisper. It’s a whole new science.”

*Good gravy, Dad has just admitted that resistance-free training is a science. What is going on?* “There is some behavioral theory behind it. . . .”

“Well, sure. This movie’ll really be good for the whole horse whisperin’ industry.”

“Could be.” It was strange to be talking about horses after not having been near one in two years. I felt like a reformed smoker discussing the taste of cigarettes.

“They got star power on the horse end, too. The broke-down racehorse is gonna be played by Lucky Strike himself—you remember, that big bay that was on the way to a triple crown a couple years ago until he snapped his leg? Willie bought into the stallion syndicate on that horse, big time. Got him cheap, but it turns out they can’t get hardly anything bred with him. Not enough huevos in the burrito, so to speak.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Growing up in the ranching business, you think nothing of discussing reproduction and who’s capable of it. This is acceptable dinner conversation.

“The Lucky Strike syndicate owners are hopin’ that getting him on camera in a western-type setting will help make him popular with quarter horse breeders. Thoroughbred registry, of course, they’ll only allow live breedin’, but with the quarter horse registry, they can do it in a lab. It could be a whole new market for a horse like Lucky Strike.”

*Hmmm . . . my father has bought syndication shares in a very expensive reproductively challenged racehorse. He’s calling to see if I want to buy in, too. “Seems like the financial potential there would be limited.” Not to rain on your parade, or anything.*

“Lucky Strike’s gonna be a bigger star than that Arab horse that played the black stallion, what with that Justin . . . uh-hh . . . Justin . . . Shay playin’ the horseman, the sky’s the limit, I guar-own-tee.”

“So, they’re going to combine an actor who’s not really a horse trainer with a five-year-old racehorse stallion and try to make a movie? That doesn’t seem very wise.”

“Oh sure. Sure.” Dad swished off my comment like a pesky

gnat. “Amazin’ thing is, they’re gonna film the movie right here in Daily. After that Justin fella was here with Amber last April, he bought the old Barlinger ranch. He says he wants to film the movie there.”

“In Daily?” I imagined my little hometown, which was only now recovering from the excitement of Amber Anderson’s big second-place *Megastar* finish, caught up in another dose of glitz. Suddenly, I was glad I lived two states away.

“Sure ’nuf.”

“At the Barlinger ranch? That place is a wreck. It’s been abandoned for years.” Back when I was in high school, we held spook houses at the Barlinger ranch. The sprawling limestone homestead had been trapped in probate for as long as anyone could remember.

“Wooh-woo, not anymore.” Dad whistled appreciatively. “They got all kinds of crews out there workin’. You oughta see it. Amber and that Justin fella are gonna turn the ranch into some kind of camp for foster kids, eventually. But right now, they’re gonna film the movie there. A’course, first they show the bigwig directors and movie-mogul types the project—sell ’em on it, so to speak, then the movie gets made. We gotta take a few days to get the horse calm and bring ol’ Justin up to speed on lookin’ like a horse whisperer.”

*In a few days? Good luck.* “Sounds interesting. Are you going to help Willie with that?”

Dad paused, and my attention drifted to the window, where a student was loading her suitcases into her car and hugging her boyfriend good-bye in the parking lot. I checked my watch. Time to get back to work if I was going to have the grades in before I went home. I was really looking forward to taking Friday off, rather than coming in to check leftover exams.

“Well, Puggy, you know I’m not any good at that kinda

thing,” Dad said. “I’m just an old cowhand. I only know how to break a horse one way.” He held an extended pause. I didn’t notice at first, because I was watching the girl on the sidewalk cling to her boyfriend like she couldn’t bear to let go. I hoped she was smart enough not to elope, leave school, and ride off into the sunset on the back of his rodeo pony.

For a moment, I saw Danny and myself all those years ago, standing on a sidewalk at Texas A&M. “*Come on,*” he said. “*Let’s just do it . . . take a year and travel hard, hit all the big rodeos. Grad school’s not going anywhere. . . .*”

“I was thinking you could come do it.” Dad’s voice seemed far away at first.

“What . . . Dad. I got distracted. What did you say?”

“I thought you could come here and help teach this Justin . . . uhhh . . . Justin . . . what’s ’iz name to work with the horse.”

“Huh?” was the only answer I could come up with.

Dad huffed impatiently. He’d soft-pedaled as long as he could. Now he was ready to put this mule in the chute. “You know, come down here, help out with the project. There’s never been anyone could work a horse like you could, Puggy. Everybody knows it wasn’t Danny who trained Mo and Blue. It was you. All Danny could do was throw a rope and tie a calf. Only reason he made it as far as he did was because you trained the horses for him. Surely you can help this Justin fella get on with Lucky Strike.”

The instant he said *Mo and Blue* and *come down here*, an invisible fist seized my lungs and squeezed tight. I couldn’t breathe. The room seemed airless. Training Mo and Blue was the greatest regret of my life, because of what it led to. “Dad I . . . I can’t, I . . . have tests to grade.” The words were wooden, robotic.

“You just said you had a long weekend startin’. This’ll only take a few days.”

“I have to log the scores . . . for minimester finals.”

“Bring that stuff along. You can do paperwork anyplace, right? You can stay down at Aunt Netta’s hotel if you don’t want to bunk out at the ranch with Willie, Mimi, and me. Come on. Folks around here think you’ve gone and moved to Timbuktu.”

“Dad, I can’t just drop everything and run off to Daily. I’m sorry.” A rising tide of nervousness mingled with guilt and made the words sound harsh. I closed my eyes, thinking, *Calm down, calm down. He can’t force you to do anything . . .*

Dad’s voice was gentle. “It’ll be good for ya, Puggy. Been an awful long time since you seen the hometown. You won’t hardly recognize it. Road’s been repaved and we got souvenir shops with Amber Anderson T-shirts, coffee mugs, bumper stickers, and CDs.”

“I can’t come, Dad.” That much was true. *I can’t*. Perspiration beaded on my forehead, and I mopped it away, focused on my reflection in the window. The woman there was pale, frightened, her eyes, green in this light, hiding behind a mop of dark curls that, by this time in the morning, needed a barrette. She looked tired, afraid, worried, older than thirty-one.

Dad sighed. I pictured him stroking his long gray mustache, analyzing the situation.

Pressing a hand over my stomach, I gulped in a breath, let it out, took in another, quelling the fear-induced adrenaline. *You’re having a panic attack. Stop it. Right now. Calm down. You’re a grown woman. He can’t make you do anything.*

“Lauren Lee.” When my father took that tone with me, I felt ten years old. “You can’t spend the rest of your natural life hidin’ from the past. You can’t. It’s been over two years. Nobody blames you for what happened. We all just want you to come home.”

*We all just want you to come home. . . .* I gripped the side of the desk. “I’m sorry, I just . . .”

“You gotta face this thing, baby girl. It’s time.”

I deflated into a chair with my head in my hand. A curtain of hair fell across my face, catching the light from the window and turning a soft coffee color. “I know, Dad.” What had gone unsaid between us for so long was finally out in the open. “I’ll work toward it, I promise. But not right now. Not this way.”

“Why not? Why not now? This movie business’ll be a good distraction—help keep yer mind off . . . things.”

*Things* . . . what a strange way to put it.

“Come on, puddin’-pie. Pack up your suitcase and get on the road home.”

Now he was using childhood endearments to try to talk me into it. I’d become so pathetic my father was cooing to me at thirty-one years old. “No, Dad. No. All right? I’m not interested in helping some neophyte actor—who, by the way, is known for having a lousy attitude—play cowboy with a horse that’s also known for having a bad attitude. I heard Lucky Strike almost killed one vet, and he was so prone to kicking the stall, they had to reset his leg a dozen times.”

Dad clicked his tongue—a gesture of regret, of finally hitting the brass tacks. “I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone, but Willie’s got lung cancer. He don’t want people to know. He hasn’t even told his girlfriend, Mimi, because as soon as he does, she’ll hit the road. She’s thirty-six and she wants to be an actress. She ain’t gonna stay around for some old man with lung cancer, even if he does have a ponytail and a twelve-hundred-dollar cowboy hat. Willie’s son from his second marriage died a few years back in a motorcycle accident. He don’t have anyone else.”

“I’m sorry . . .” A kernel of sympathy sprouted in my chest, and I pictured Willie Wardlaw, the once-strapping movie studio wrangler, who in my memory still stood laughing on a backlot with my father, now washed up, aging, with a few bad mar-

riages, a superficial girlfriend, lung cancer, and a son who'd passed away prematurely. I thought of the times that checks from Willie's studio had bought extra Christmas presents, helped pay the bills at our ranch, or financed a new truck or tractor. I remembered Friday nights, curled up on the couch between Kemp and Dad, watching *The Texan* on TV, pointing out Willie working as an extra in the background—a tall man on a tall horse.

This wasn't a fitting way for a childhood icon to end up.

Another part of me, my self-defense mechanism, said, *For heaven's sake, don't go sappy. You barely know this man. Dad hasn't seen him in years. Now suddenly everyone's supposed to drop everything?* “Dad, I don't see what I can—”

“This movie deal's gotta work with Lucky Strike, Puggy. Willie's got everything tied up in the syndicate on that horse, and he's got some partners turning impatient.” Dad's tone was low and somber, laced with a weary disappointment. Disappointment in me. In my weakness. In my selfishness. In my lack of willingness to do for him what he had done for me two years ago. Drop everything, give all. “I need you here, Puggy. I got money tied up in this thing, too.”

“What money? What are you talking about?”

His hesitation indicated that I wasn't going to like his answer. “I took out a loan to help Willie. I put the shop building and the ranch up against it.”

My mind went blank. “You did what? Dad, why would you do that for someone you haven't seen in years?”

“I owe a debt,” he said, as if it were that simple, as if it made sense to have mortgaged everything he owned for an old rodeo buddy. “Willie helped me out when I had to have it, Pug. It was Willie that paid for the surgery on Kemp's arm when he got hurt pitching his junior year. Without that operation, Kemp

wouldn't have been able to play college ball. Willie never would take a dime back, until now. It's time to repay."

*Not this way*, I thought. How dare Willie Wardlaw drag my father into his problems. My father had fixed cars, scrimped, and saved for years to take care of the ranch left to him by my grandparents. His shop building was part and parcel with the building that housed Aunt Donetta's beauty shop and the Daily Hotel. The building owned by Eldridges for over a hundred years. How could my father be so foolish as to gamble it on some ill-conceived film project? He could lose everything. Aunt Donetta could lose everything. Where was Kemp while all this was happening?

"Don't sign anything else." The words seemed to come from somewhere outside my body. "I'll be in Daily tomorrow afternoon."