

CHAPTER ONE

For as long as Ryder Daniels had known Sammy Marshall she had been his sunshine.

She had come into his life golden and bright and warm at a time when everything had seemed dark and cold.

And like anyone who had been lost in the dark for a long while, he'd squinted against the light when he'd first seen it. Had felt like it was just too damned much.

At first he'd wrapped himself up in a blanket of his own anger and bitterness. But soon all her gentle warmth had broken through and he'd shed some layers. Some. Not all.

And only for her.

Much like the sun, he never got used to her brightness. Time didn't dull the shine.

Even now as she spun circles out in the middle of the dance floor at the Gold Valley Saloon, he could feel it. Down in his bones. Her blond hair swung around with every movement, tangled and curling, her arms wide and free, the bangles on her wrists glittering in the light with each turn. The white dress she wore was long and loose, but when it caught hold of her skin it was somehow more suggestive and revealing than any of the short, tight dresses out on the dance floor could have ever been.

Ryder looked, because he was only a man.

But Sammy was his sun.

His source of light. His source of warmth.

And much like the sun, he knew that getting close enough to touch it was impossible.

There were two men dancing with her, spinning her back and forth between them, and she was laughing, her cheeks red and glowing. Then with a light pat—one for each of their shoulders—she abandoned them and made her way back over to the table where Ryder was sitting with his siblings, most notably his sister Pansy, and her brand-new fiancé, West Caldwell.

They had called them all out tonight to make the announcement. But Ryder already knew.

West had come and spoken to him like he was Pansy's father.

And in many ways, he supposed that he was.

When their parents had died, it had been up to him to take care of his siblings.

When their parents had died, all the light in his world had gone out.

It had left him frozen.

Sammy had gotten him through.

And he knew that Sammy would say something entirely different. That he was her guardian, her protector. And that was true in a way. But she had saved him. Had saved him in ways that she would never fully understand.

Laughing, Sammy plopped down at the table, right beside him, her shoulder brushing up against his, the touch a sort of strange familiar torture to him.

It nearly went by unnoticed.

Nearly.

“Does anybody need another drink?” she said, pushing her mane of hair out of her face and treating him to a smile.

“Your friends might want one,” he pointed out. She cast a glance back at the dance floor. Then she made a dismissive noise. “They’re not in the running to becoming my friends,” she said.

He was relieved to hear it, even though he wouldn’t ever say.

Sammy was everything wild and free. Everything that he never would be.

He had no desire—ever—to try and bottle up that freedom and use it for himself. To limit it. Whatever he thought about it sometimes.

“I’ll get the drinks,” Colt said, getting up from his seat.

One of the cousins that had grown up with them, Colt was only a couple years younger than Ryder. He’d been fifteen when their parents had been killed. His brother Jake had been seventeen.

Reining in the older kids had been one of the harder parts of the whole thing. Because how did you tell someone who was basically your age that they needed to quit staying out all night and maybe try a little bit harder at school?

Well, you just said it, but it didn’t always go down well.

Ryder had been a teenager, not a parent. It wasn’t like he’d been a model for anything good or decent. The only reason he had kept his grades up when he was in high school was because he wanted to stay on the football team. That had been his life.

And he had been untouchable. Golden.

Until he wasn’t.

Until he had discovered that his family was more than touchable. They were breakable.

Until he had to give up college scholarships and other aspirations so that he could take care of everyone.

Not that he would have made it into the NFL after college. He just would have been able to use football to get through school.

It didn’t matter. He had never wanted to be a rancher. He wanted to get out. He wanted to leave home and see the world and have something different. Different than his uncle, who had lived on one plot of land for his whole life.

Different than his father, who had been the police chief of the town he was born in. The town he’d never left.

And here he was. The same. Just the same. And only about ten years younger than his dad had been when he'd died, too.

That was a real parade of cheer.

It didn't take Colt long to return with drinks, and he passed around bottles of beer. Pansy took one and stood.

His younger sister was pocket-size. A petite anomaly in a family that was otherwise of above average height. Pansy had followed their father's footsteps. She was currently the youngest police chief Gold Valley had ever had. And the first female. He was damned proud of her. But he didn't believe for a moment that it was down to something he'd done right.

Pansy was just good all the way through. Determined and strong. She'd had to be.

She'd only been ten when their parents had died.

Poor Rose had been seven.

Yeah. It had been a certain kind of hard to deal with the teenagers. But comforting children who were crying helplessly over mothers who would never hold them again...

That was a hell he didn't like to remember even now. So instead he just looked at Pansy, a grown woman with a man by her side.

That had been the first time he had to deal with something like that, too.

West Caldwell had come and asked him for permission. And Ryder had a feeling that he should have rejected that. Told him he didn't need it.

But he felt like he did. He felt like he needed it for each and every one of them. Because they were his.

Even Sammy.

Because while she might be the sun in his life, he was her protector. It was his job to make sure nothing bad ever happened to them.

"West and I have an announcement," Pansy said, smiling. "We're getting married."