

EXCERPT**RETURN TO RUBY'S RANCH – RUBY'S RANCH SERIES BOOK 1
RHONDA FRANKHOUSER****Excerpt-**

The old, beat-up Chevy pickup came to an abrupt stop about a foot from the back of Ruby's prized Jeep. She scowled with disapproval as the driver shoved open the door and dropped to his booted feet before the engine even had a chance to shut off.

"Help you, miss?" he asked, with a slow, deep twang, wiping the dirt from his hands with a handkerchief he'd pulled from his back pocket.

She squinted against the midday sun a little harder now as his voice rang a touch familiar. She watched him for an over-long moment, the mother cat twisting her lithe body around his legs in greeting. Sweat glistened on his tanned, muscular arms as he bent to pick up the kittens that came out to join their mother.

She smiled. There had to be something special about a man who elicited the love of animals. He was at least six foot two, and built like he could lift a hundred pounds straight over his head with no problem at all. A smudge of dried mud followed the line of his strong, stubbled jaw. He could be the most handsome man Ruby had ever seen. Not a sophisticated, city kind of handsome. More a *Russell Crowe*, gladiator, kind of handsome.

The irritated scowl returned to his face after he put the tiny, tabby kittens down, almost like he'd just remembered he wasn't pleased about being pulled away from something important. This made him all the more interesting. Part of Ruby was glad she'd been such a bother. The day just became more intriguing.

"They're adorable. And they seem to like you." She tried to break the awkward silence.

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Curious, soulful green eyes peered out from under his dusty Stetson hat. He gazed first at her well-worn Justin cowboy boots, then slowly up her long legs to the khaki shorts, pausing momentarily at the denim shirt she had tied loosely around her waist, showing just a hint of pale skin. His gaze stopped momentarily at the mess of red-blond hair she'd pulled away from her face, before he finally met her eyes.

Ruby held her giggle as he finished his perusal, not wanting to make him self-conscious since she'd recognized him. Billy MacCallister. Had to be. My, how he'd grown from the runny-nosed brat who used to follow her around so many years before. He'd been the pain-in-the-butt, kid brother of her best friend.

But, this grown up Billy MacCallister was a whole different creature. *Mercy, he's definitely a full grown man now. Ranch life looks good on him.*

"So," Ruby avoided his eyes to keep him at a disadvantage for just a bit longer. She reached down to pet the dogs again, calming them. "How's your sister these days, Billy?"

He stopped wiping the dirt from his jeans and searched to get a better look at her face.

"What's the matter, Billy? Think you're seeing a ghost?" A smile crossed her lips.

"Ruby?" he asked, quietly at first then louder. "Ruby?" This time with unashamed excitement. Billy took two long-legged strides toward her, tilting his hat to get a better look. "Well, look at that, it *is* you."

Before Ruby had a chance to respond, he lifted her off the step and twirled her around, not caring at all that she now wore half the dirt he once had all over him.

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The enticing scent of musk shampoo, salty sweat, and horses swirled around her, drawing her in. *How could a man smell that good after working in the mud?* It took all her strength to keep from leaning in and making a fool of herself. He smelled like home to her and she had to admit, it felt good to be held.

"Billy, good grief, put me down." She tugged at her shirt to keep it down, embarrassed. The pups jumped up, anxious now to play, as Ruby tried to gain composure. Not an easy task when being twirled around by a handsome cowboy.

"Ruby Lattrell, it's so good to see you. How the hell are you?" The honest joy in seeing her poured from him. "Oh my God, you look fantastic!" He set her down and brushed the hair away from her face, looking her over now with those same hungry eyes he'd had as a love-struck kid.

She glanced away, self-conscious. When she finally mustered the courage to gaze up at him, she couldn't help but return his infectious smile. There was no worry there, or pretense. The tiny lines around his joy-filled eyes showed only that he knew how to smile. How to laugh. Something she'd forgotten how to do a long time ago.

"Well, that's certainly more of a welcome than I expected." She stepped back to get some space and a better look at him. He had to be coming up on thirty now. Strapping. Still driving his mom crazy with that unruly chestnut hair tucked behind his ears, no doubt. Same innocent, broad smile that held secrets.

He continued talking and following her every move, anxious to know everything all at once. Where had she been? How had she stayed so perfect? Finally, he realized she hadn't said a word. He stopped then, smiled that secret smile again, his eyes slowly

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filling with concern. "Ruby, I'm sorry I'm just going on. How are you? Are you all right?"

Oh Lord, I'm so sorry about your grandmother."

Ruby flushed when he caught her staring. "Oh, I ah, I'm fine. Thank you, though. I can't believe she is gone. This place will be really weird without Granny Rube here." She took a step back toward the door, gathering herself, hoping she'd find the key in the usual hiding place so she could make a graceful exit.

"You don't act fine." He caught up with her, supporting her elbow like a real southern gentleman. "Let's get you inside."

Ruby didn't protest. She kind of liked the fuss he made. This was someone she'd known for nearly all her life. It felt good to know he'd missed her.

"Just wait till Claudie finds out you're home. She's going to just die." He reached behind the rusted iron pot for the key and turned it in the lock. "She's not living out here anymore. She's got a place in town. Married a nice city guy who moved here from Arizona, Mike Calloway. They bought old Fike's Market and fixed it up real nice. Doing real well with it. She likes living in town so much better than out here." He kept talking as he closed the door behind them.

The familiar smells of the house hit Ruby first, distracting her from what Billy was saying. Gingerbread cookies, *Pledge* furniture polish giving off an ever-present hint of lemon.

Ruby stopped in the entry, closed her eyes, and visualized her mother and Granny Rube laughing in the kitchen, handmade aprons tied around their waists, shoving cookies in that old Wedgewood oven, sharing private giggles.

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Ruby stood for a long while as she replayed the memories over in her mind, only vaguely aware Billy had gone silent and held a supportive hand at the small of her back.

"Welcome home, Ruby," he whispered, his sweet eyes searching hers.

She didn't know why, but just then she couldn't keep herself from turning and wiping the dust from his cheek, feeling more true compassion from this one understanding look than she'd ever felt before.

"Thanks, Billy." She realized suddenly her eyes filled with tears. "Thanks for making me feel so welcome. I'm glad to be home."

She felt as if she'd stepped back in time. She was just a teenager when she left home almost two decades ago. Nearly everything in the house remained in the same place. The fireplace room still held the same worn velvet couches and mahogany side tables. The faded ivy wallpaper she'd helped Granny hang curled at the corners where moisture and age had gotten to the glue. The heirloom rug passed from her grandfather's family, now worn and fraying around the edges.

The same photos capturing a more innocent time continued to be displayed on the dusty river-rock mantle. Yellowed images of Granny Rube's parents looked too small and frail to have endured such a rough pioneer life. Next to that picture, Ruby saw the photo of her Grandpa Mac, taken only days before he was trampled to death by his prized bull, Heathen.

Ruby picked up the tarnished frame and held it close, realizing only now how handsome a man her grandfather had been, tall and lanky, his deep set eyes full of the devil. Reminded her of her mother.

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"Granny used to say it served him right to get taken by the one beast on the ranch that was ornerier than him." Ruby wiped the dust from the frame and replaced it back on the mantle in the exact place it was before. "Momma told me Granny put Heathen down herself with a twelve-gauge shotgun the night he killed Grandpa Mac, but I still don't know if that's true. She had such a flair for the dramatic, it was hard to tell fact from fantasy."

"Your granny was a good woman, Ruby," Billy finally offered, a measure of respect in his voice. "Always remember that. She helped me out more times than I can count."

"I'm just sad I missed so many years with her. All I have are old memories of how things used to be. Silly stuff like, I remember when she calmed Jake and me during those hell-raising thunderstorms, and chased us into the pond when we were driving everyone nuts because we were so bored." Ruby turned away from the photos and took in the room once again. "She always had time for us. I can't believe I let her die alone."