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Best of the West

FEATURING LAINIEY™

BY LAURA LEIGH MOTTE
ILLUSTRATED BY GÉRALDINE CHARETTE





our
generation.

This is Lainey's story.



L A I N E Y TM

BEST OF THE WEST

BY

LAURA LEIGH MOTTE

ILLUSTRATED BY GÉRALDINE CHARETTE

An Our Generation® book

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EXTRA! EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

*Big words, wacky words, powerful words, funny words...
what do they all mean? They are marked with this symbol *.
Look them up in the Glossary at the end of this book.*

Chapter One

LITTLE COWGIRL

When I was four years old, my mom gave me a toy horse. It had brown eyes, a black mane, and a red scarf that Mom called a kerchief.

I named it ‘Thunder,’ and jumped right on it! I galloped around the coffee table. I leaped over a stool. I fed my horse pretend-hay (it was just uncooked spaghetti noodles).

Mom called me her “little cowgirl.”

“What’s a cowgirl?” I asked.

“A cowgirl rides a horse and lives on a ranch,” Mom explained. We live in Washington, D.C. It’s a big city with lots of cars and tall buildings. But not a lot of horses. And definitely no cows.

“Are there cowboys, too?”

“Yes, there are cowboys, too,” Mom smiled.



“Can we go see one?” I asked.

“Maybe one day,” Mom said. “But first, I believe your horsie is thirsty.”

I looked at my hobby horse and gasped. “You’re right!” I swung my leg over the stick and galloped towards the kitchen. As I filled a bowl with tap water, I forgot all about meeting a real-life cowboy.

Until I met Wayne.





Chapter Two

DIVING & DANCING

I have diving class on Friday afternoons. This Friday was especially fun because I had just done my very first back dive. Even though I'm eight, I'm in the Advanced group. Somersaults are my specialty. I love the way you leap into the air. It feels like you're flying. You're a bird. Then, when you land, it's not hard. It's just water. And suddenly you're no longer a bird. You're a fish!

Mom says diving suits my personality. I *like* to dive in and try new things. There's nothing I won't try. Especially food. That's how I know I like avocado and strongly dislike asparagus.

There's only one problem with diving: my hair! It's long and thick and takes *forever* to dry. And I don't have the patience to stand under the hair dryer in the changing room. When it's chilly



outside, Mom makes us hang out in the community center until my hair dries.

It's not as boring as it sounds. Mom brings snacks. I look at the other families coming and going. Mom and I chat. She gives me tips on my diving posture. I ask if we can go out for pizza. Mom checks my hair.

“Still not dry,” she said, patting my head with her hand.

That’s when I saw the poster. It was taped to the wall by the elevators. Something about it drew me in. Maybe it was the dancing cowboy boots. Or the brown horse with the red scarf.

I leaned closer to read the words. *Learn to Line Dance! Friday Nights.*

“Can we go?” I asked Mom. We were standing in front of the poster.

“You want to line dance?” Mom looked doubtful.

“Absolutely!” I exclaimed. Then I paused.

“What’s line dancing?”

Mom smirked. “Line dancing is when people get in a line and dance together to country music.





There are a set of steps that repeat. The steps are called out by the person leading the dance.”

“Do they all wear pretty boots like that?” I asked, pointing to the poster.

Mom smiled. “I don’t know. Maybe.” She read the poster, then frowned. “It says it’s for seniors, darling.”

“What’s a senior?” I asked.

“Seniors are older people, like Grandma and Gramps.”

“That’s perfect. Let’s invite them! After all, it’s Friday and it’s always fun to do something fun and family-ish on a Friday.”

Mom looked at her watch. “It’s late and we haven’t had dinner. Can’t we do something fun and family-ish tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow, I’ll be at Dad’s, remember? Come on, Mom! It’s something new to try!”

Mom sighed, then pulled out her phone. While she called Gramps and Grandma, I wrapped my arms around her waist and squeezed.

Even though my mom acts serious and



‘Mom-like,’ she’s a lot like me. She likes to *dive in* too.



The studio had wood floors and a wall of mirrors that went all the way up to the ceiling.

The room was full of people who looked like grandparents. Lots of white hair and smiles. But the dancing instructor, Wayne, looked younger. He had curly brown hair and was wearing a cowboy hat.

When Wayne saw us, Mom smiled sheepishly. “We’re not seniors, but my daughter really wanted to come.”

“My grandparents said they’d come next week,” I added. “They’re seniors. But they couldn’t make it tonight because Gramps missed his nap and was grumpy.”

“Grandpas need their naps,” Wayne nodded. This made Mom smile.

That’s when I noticed Wayne’s boots. They were just as fancy as the ones I saw in the poster.



His were red-and-black leather with little green stars on the sides.

“I like your cowboy boots,” I said.

“Every cowboy has to have a pair.”

“Are you a cowboy?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess you can call me a cowboy,” he said. “I grew up on a ranch in Montana and I know my way around a horse and saddle.”

“I have a horse!” I blurted out. I told him about my hobby horse, Thunder. “That’s what your poster made me think of. I’ve always dreamed of riding a real horse. Now I dive, and do gymnastics, because it’s hard to ride a horse in the city.”

“You betcha* it is,” Wayne said. “That’s why y’all gotta move to Montana.” He turned around to greet a couple who were just arriving.

“Howdy* Paloma, Jonas!”

Paloma’s dress had a frilly underskirt, and her gray hair was piled high on her head. Jonas wore a yellow shirt with fringes. I wished Mom and I had dressed up. I was already picturing what I could wear next week. I had a T-shirt with a



horse on it. Mom had a jean jacket with fringes.

“Okay everyone, let’s get this hoedown* started!” When Wayne turned on the music, I had to stop thinking about what to wear and start thinking about how to move.

Wayne demonstrated the basic moves. He even showed Paloma how to do-si-do* in her wheelchair.

And can I just say that the do-si-do is the best dance move ever?!

“You’re a fast learner!” Wayne commented as I danced beside Paloma. “You may live in the city, but I think you’re a cowgirl at heart.”

Mom had more trouble. She said she was a special kind of cowgirl, the kind with two left feet. Wayne laughed at this, then patiently showed Mom the steps. During the dance, Mom crashed into Paloma’s wheelchair. She was very embarrassed. But when Wayne called Mom a dangerous dancer and said that he might have to charge her with ‘reckless dancing,’ she giggled.

After the class, we were starving.



Diving + line dancing = HUNGER!

Wayne came up to us and asked if we wanted to go for pizza.

“Yes!” I answered, for both of us. “Going out for pizza is the *best*.” Wayne agreed. I wondered what a cowboy likes on his pizza.

In the restaurant, Wayne told us about his life in Montana.

“Do you miss it?” Mom asked.

“Sure do,” he said, shaking a bottle of hot sauce over his pizza. (*This cowboy sure liked things spicy.*) “Here in D.C., I wear a suit all day and tap numbers into a computer. Teaching these classes gives me a chance to put on my cowboy boots and move my feet. And the best part? I get to share something I love with other folks.”

The next week, Mom and I went back for more line dancing with Wayne. And more pizza.

Twenty-seven pizza dates later, Wayne asked Mom if she wanted to be his cowgirl, for life. It took me a second to understand that he was asking her to marry him.



Mom was so surprised she couldn't speak.
The waiter came over.

“Have you decided?” he asked.

“Yes!” I answered. “To both of you.”

And that's how a cowboy became a part of
my family.



Chapter Three

YOU'LL BE NEEDING THESE

I saw the box when I got home from school. It was lying on my bed, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a bow.

For Lainey, it said. That's me.

The 'P' was dotted with a sun. Mom does that sometimes. That's because my name means 'bright light.' She calls me her ray of sunshine because I always look at the bright side. I don't know if my name made me this way, or I made me this way. It's how I am.

I picked up the box. It was too heavy to be my new school pants. I shook it. It felt solid. So, not a puzzle. A doll, maybe?

"It's from me and Wayne," Mom said.

She was standing in the doorway.

"Wayne, too?" I asked.





“Especially Wayne,” she replied, with a mysterious smile.

“Especially?” Suddenly, my mystery gift was *way more* mysterious. It wasn’t my birthday. My birthday was a month ago. It wasn’t anywhere near Christmas. And Wayne was in on it, too. That meant it had to be something important. Something out of the ordinary.

First, I read the card.

“You’ll be needing these...”

I untied the bow, tore off the paper, and lifted the lid.

Inside was the most beautiful pair of cowboy boots I’d ever seen. They were blue and black, and there were big blue stars sewn onto them. They were so special. I couldn’t believe they were for me.

Pistachio, my cat, was also speechless. He couldn’t believe the big empty box was for him. He sniffed at the cardboard, then jumped inside. While he attacked the tissue paper with his claws, I plunked down on the floor and pulled on the boots. It took some yanking. I sprang back up and marched over



to the mirror. Even with my school uniform, they were magnificent.

“We’re going someplace where you’ll need them,” Mom explained.

“More line dancing classes at the community center?” I asked.

“Much further.”



“Miss Buttercup!” I shouted across the room to my smart speaker. “Play country music.” (Miss Buttercup is what I call my smart speaker because she’s yellow, like a buttercup.)

I gripped the sides of my cowboy boots and yanked them up over my calves. This time, they slid onto my feet. I’d been wearing them every day since I got them. Wayne said you needed to break them in.

“Where is Montana?” Alicia asked. She was on my bed, petting Pistachio. Alicia is my best friend. She lives next door.

“West!” I replied. “It’s where all the cowboys



live.” I was so busy looking at my feet that I’d danced right into the corner of my dresser. Ouch!

“Every year, Wayne’s parents have a family reunion. It’s called Best of the West because Wayne’s family name is Best. This year, Mom and I are invited, too. Because we’re his family, too.”

“You are?”

“Yeah! After the wedding, Wayne’ll be my official step-dad. But I don’t really like the word, *step*, so I’m just going to call him my *do-si-do* Dad, because that’s a step, too. Right?”

Alicia leapt off the bed and we do-si-doed together. When we were all danced out, we collapsed onto the bed.

“There’ll be horses there, too,” I told Alicia, catching my breath. “Wayne promised to give me riding lessons. There’s a mare named Shadow. She’s eight, just like us. Wayne says she is very gentle, and ‘smarter than a cow*,’ which is supposed to be a compliment. He says I’m going to love her!”

Pistachio arched his back and meowed loudly. He sounded upset. “But not more than I love you,”



I said, scratching him under the chin.

Pistachio obviously wasn't convinced, because he turned away from me and leapt right into my suitcase, which was open on the floor.

"He wants to go, too," Alicia said.

"You can't come, Pistachio!" But that reminded me. I looked at the clock.

It was time.



My Dad lives with Helen. They live in 'the Blue House' on Havelock Street. They both like crossword puzzles, zombie movies, and their new espresso machine. They take care of Pistachio whenever Mom and I go away.

When I arrived, Helen was sprinkling cocoa on top of Dad's cappuccino.

"Would you like a Café au Laine?" she asked.

"Yes, please!" I put down Pistachio's cage and opened the door. He bounded over to Helen and rubbed against her leg. "Oh, Pistachio, I've missed you, too," Helen said.



By the way, a Café au Laine isn't actually coffee. It's steamed milk, with a squirt of vanilla syrup and a sprinkle of cinnamon on top. Helen froths the milk so thick that you can eat it with a spoon. When she was done, she poured the milk into a mint-green cup, and then placed it in a matching saucer. I sat at the counter as she served me. It was just like being in a café.

“We're so excited for you!” Helen gushed.

“I'm excited for me, too!” I showed her my boots and told Helen and Dad about the new step-cousins I'd be meeting.

Dad pulled out a pencil and we did the math.

“Wayne has two brothers and two sisters. They each have two children. That's eight cousins.”

Suddenly, Dad dropped his pencil. He looked concerned. “Are you nervous?”

“About what?”

“...meeting all those people...?”

I groaned and rolled my eyes. This was a typical Dad question. For him, being in a room full of people is like me being in a room full of



asparagus. Mom calls him an introvert. He prefers staying at home rather than going out.

When I visit Dad and Helen, we never go out. They cook fancy meals. We play board games. I do a lot of homework at the Blue House, too. Helen spellchecks my assignments and Dad helps me memorize for tests. “We’re cozy in our nest,” Helen always says.

Yet, my dad was right about one thing. I was going from being in a family with just one kid—me, myself, and I—to a family with many kids. All of them knew each other. I’d be the new cousin on the block.

I felt butterflies in my stomach. *Was I nervous? Should I be nervous?*

Not for a second!

I was the most excited I’ve ever been in my entire life.

Cowboy Land, here I come!



Chapter Four

COWBOY LAND

On the drive from the airport to the ranch, I looked out my window. It was so different from D.C. There were fields with cows grazing. There were stretches of forest and mountains on all sides. The land seemed to go on forever!

Wayne was driving. The radio played country music songs. Wayne sang along. Mom opened the windows. I smelled grass and flowers and something else, another strong odor. Before I could ask what it was—

“Cow dung*,” Wayne grinned, catching my eye in the rearview mirror.

“Right,” I said with a smile. I didn’t mind. It was all so different from the city I’d left behind, and I loved every bit of it.

Finally, the car pulled up to a ranch. There



was a sign on the wooden gate.

Welcome to the Best Ranch.

We drove past a barn with a red roof, and then pulled up to the main house.

The house was made of wood, with giant logs and a massive stone chimney. A dog ran out to greet us, yapping and wagging its tail.

“Billy Bob!” cried Wayne, as we climbed out of the car. The dog bounded over to us. I leaned down to pet him. He turned in circles around my legs.

“Lainey, we’ve heard so much about you!” I heard a woman say. She was holding a baby in her arms. Wayne introduced us to his mom—but everyone just called her Grandma Best.

“And this bundle of cuteness is my granddaughter Virginie. She is the latest addition to the family.” The baby cooed and wiggled her fingers.

I noticed a bunch of kids gathered in a corner of the yard. They were tossing U-shaped pieces towards a stake. When they saw me, they stopped





playing and started whispering to each other.

Seeing me looking their way, Grandma Best handed the baby to Aunt Martha, and then reached for my hand. “Come with me, sweetheart. I’ll introduce you to the cousin crew. They’re all dyin’ to meet you.”

For a split second, my legs froze, and I remembered Dad’s words. *Are you nervous meeting all those people?* I felt a tap on my leg. I turned and looked down to see a little girl. She was holding out a bouquet of wildflowers.

“For you, *steff*-cousin,” she said.

“Ah, Blanche, that’s so sweet of you!” Grandma Best said.

“I picked them all by myself!” Blanche said. Her warm smile melted the ice in my legs. But before I could march my unfrozen legs over to say ‘Hi’ to the cousin crew, the cousin crew had already marched over to me.

“I love your boots,” said a girl with golden braids. “Oh! And I’m Leigh-Ann!”

“Uncle Wayne wanted to buy you some all-



brown ones,” said a girl in a straw hat. “He said ‘classic’ but I said ‘class-ick!’ Oh! And I’m Abigale!”

“And I’m Darcy-Lynn,” said a girl with long, dark ponytails. “And I think your boots are just plumb*.”

“Plumb? Like the fruit?” I asked.

“Nah. When something’s so good it can’t be any better, folks around here say it’s plumb. It’s a good thing, don’t worry,” explained Grandma Best.

“Are we playing or what?” asked a boy. He was holding a plastic horseshoe. “Or are we still yackin’* about boots and makin’ the new steff-cousin feel welcome?”

“Dustin!” Leigh-Ann said, swatting him gently. Dustin grinned at me.

“I’ll play!” I said, grinning right back. I handed the bouquet of flowers to Mom, then walked towards the lawn where the game was set up.

Twenty throws later, no matter what I did, my horseshoe would not hit the stake. Even little



Blanche had better aim. My last throw nearly knocked over a chicken that was passing by! It fluttered its wings in a huff, then hopped into the barn.

“Stay in there, chicken!” said Dustin. “Just in case the city girl tries again.”

City girl. The words stuck in my head. I’d never thought about that before. Was I a city girl? It didn’t feel like a bad thing. Instead, it made me feel special. It also felt like a challenge. And I love a challenge! *Could this city girl win at horseshoes?*

I kept trying. I hit a shovel, grazed Dustin’s hat, and knocked over a flowerpot. Luckily, the flower in the pot was unharmed.

When we added up the points, my team came in last.

“I’ll have to keep working on it,” I said with a big grin. “A lot.” Everybody laughed. Blanche hugged me. “You’re so funny, steff-cousin.”

Though I had lost at the horseshoe toss, I’d won over my cousins.

I felt like I belonged here, in Cowboy Land.





“Grilled cheese or hot dog?” Grandpa Best called out, holding a pair of tongs.

“Grilled cheese, please!” I hollered, walking over to where he was barbecuing.

“You betcha,” Grandpa Best said, flipping a sandwich on the grill. He was wearing an apron that said ‘Grandpa: King of the BBQ.’ Wayne’s brother Clive was helping.

The family was gathered on the patio, which had a sink, a fridge, and a big stone oven, too. They called it an outdoor kitchen and it was the best thing ever.

Grandpa Best made the sandwiches right on the barbecue. The bread had grill marks and tasted really good. They said the cheese was made by Aunt Patsy and Uncle Owen. They have a dairy farm nearby. Patsy is Wayne’s sister, and she’s Darcy-Lynn and Dustin’s mom. Wayne’s two brothers, Clive and Nathan, run the cattle farm nearby. The cows I saw grazing as we drove by in the car must have been theirs.



After lunch, Mom went for a walk with Wayne. He wanted to show her where he grew up. It made me happy seeing them both so happy.

“Are y’all ready for the next Best thing?” Dustin asked, giving me a daring look.

“I’m always ready,” I chirped.

“You don’t mean...?” Darcy-Lynn glared at Dustin.

“I do mean...” Dustin replied.

Abigale looked worried. “You think it’s a good idea?”

“We don’t want to scare the city girl on her very first day!” Leigh-Ann chimed in.

Now I was *really* curious. “What are you guys talking about?”



Chapter Five

HAYSTACK-JUMPING

The cows watched from their stalls as we followed Dustin into the barn. A brown horse neighed softly. On its stall, there was a name plate. It said ‘Shadow.’

Shadow!

That was the horse I was going to ride! But before I could say hello to her, Dustin called me over.

“Lainey, this way!” he said, as he climbed up a ladder. At the top of the ladder, there was a loft. I joined Dustin at the far edge, by a railing. “So, what are we doing?”

“Jumpin’,” he replied.

“Jumping where?”

“There.” He pointed to the first floor of the barn. It was a long way down.



“Are you sure we’re allowed?”

“Allowed? Ha! It’s practically an obligation,” I heard a girl scoff. I looked over.

The girl was seated on an old sofa in a corner of the loft. She seemed to be writing in a journal or something. She was using an upside-down crate for a table. It looked like a hideout. The girl was bigger than the rest of us, maybe a teenager. She had long, straight hair and bangs that fell over her eyes.

“Grandma Best used to do it as a little girl and so did her parents, and their parents, and all our parents, too. So, apparently, we got to do it, too. Like a lot of other things.”

The girl frowned and scribbled some more in her journal.

I scratched my head, not sure what to make of her. I looked at Abigale.

“Let her buck*,” Abigale whispered to me. “Winona’s against fun, is all.” I learned that Winona is one of the Best cousins. She has a twin named Wyatt. He does riding competitions.



I looked down again. There was a huge pile of loosely-stacked hay.

“Will it be soft enough?”

“Think of it like a big golden pillow,” said Darcy-Lynn. She explained how haystacks are different. “There are the hard ones.” She pointed to a row of tightly-stacked large squares. “Those are good for Hide-and-Seek and tag and stuff. But that one down there? That’s a soft-stack. Grandma Best makes it with a pitchfork. She does it every year for the family reunion. It’s for jumping.”

“Check this out,” said Dustin as he sprung out of the opening. He did a quick spin in the air before landing in the hay.

“Show-off!” shouted Darcy-Lynn.

“You don’t need to be as fancy as all that,” said Leigh-Ann.

“Yeah. You can just jump,” said Darcy-Lynn. “Like this.” As casual as you please, she walked out of the opening. Arms folded, she dropped, straight as a pin, into the pile. I looked down as she popped out of the hay with a silly grin. “See? Easy



as pie.”

Leigh-Ann went next. “*Yee-haw!*” she shrieked, fluttering her arms like a tiny bird before landing in the pile. She popped her head out of the pile, pulling strands of hay from her hair. Abigale went next. Down under, the kids swept and restacked the hay after each jump.

Finally, only Blanche and I were left in the loft.

On the ground, all the cousins were looking up at me. Wayne and Mom had come back from their walk. Grandma and Grandpa Best had gathered around, too.

“You don’t have to do it, if you don’t want to, honey,” said Mom, looking sympathetic.

“My turn,” said Blanche. “It’s easy. See?” When she jumped, she plugged her nose, as if she were jumping into a swimming pool. In a flash, I realized something.

I’m always jumping into water from a diving board. I do it all the time. Haystack-jumping wasn’t that much different. This was a couple yards. I had



jumped way higher in diving class.

“Come on, Lainey!” cheered Leigh-Ann.

“You can do it!”

“You got this, City Girl,” said Dustin.

This city girl knew exactly what she was going to do...

I jumped...





Chapter Six

DINNER AND A (BIRD) BATH

The next thing I knew, I was in the haystack.

I heard *hoorays* and whistles and claps as I sat up in the haystack.

“That’s the first time I see someone do a front flip on their very first try!” said Dustin, as he restacked the hay.

“That’s gotta be a new Best record,” said Grandma Best. “The girl’s got sand*, that’s *fer shore*.”

I grinned. “Told you, I’m a girl who likes to *dive* in.”

“She’s a better haystack-jumper than horseshoe-thrower, that’s for sure,” joked Dustin. He acted cool but I could tell he was impressed.

We climbed and jumped, over and over again, for an hour at least. I taught Dustin some of



the moves I'd learned in my diving classes. He said he'd like to take diving classes, too.

"There is only one tiny problem," I said. "Haystacks are scratchier than water! Next time, I'll wear long sleeves."

"Nah. Gittin' scratched up is part of the fun!" Dustin said.

For dinner, we all ate together at the Cousins' Table on the patio. The grown-ups were going to eat together later, when we were all in bed. We chatted as we dipped our bread in the delicious tomato soup Grandma Best had made with tomatoes from her vegetable garden. We talked about the city and what was different about it. I admitted I'd never seen a real horse until this afternoon.

"Seriously!?" shrieked Darcy-Lynn.

"Don't you worry, little pony. We're gonna get you horse-savvy soon enough," said Grandma Best, tipping a ladle of soup into my bowl.

Abigale secretly snuck food to Billy Bob under the table. Then he came over to me.

"He's licking my leg. He thinks I'm food!"



I screamed. We all giggled. Then we played ‘rock, paper, scissors’ to decide who got to eat the last piece of bread. Abigale won.

I was used to being the only grandchild in my family. Uncle Joe has no kids and my father is an only child. Sure, that means I am totally spoiled, with lots of gifts and candy. I never have to share. But sometimes, if I really think about it, maybe I am—at least sometimes, during holidays and vacations—a bit lonely. Being in a big group of children at a family gathering was a new experience, and I loved it. Even the baby, Virginie, sat at the table with us. She was fastened onto her high chair. I made funny faces with her and she smiled. Aunt Martha let me feed her spoonfuls of applesauce.

“You’ll be a good older sister one day,” said Grandma Best, winking at Wayne. Mom smiled and blushed a little.

Holding a piece of strawberry cobbler on my fork, I found myself yawning. On the horizon, the mountains were traced with soft pink. The sun was



lower in the sky. I checked my watch. It was eight o'clock.

“I think Lainey might need to hit the hay*,” said Wayne.

I nodded, hoping he meant it was bedtime, and not time for more haystack-jumping.

“But first—a bird bath!” said Grandma Best.

“A bird bath?” *What did she mean?*

Next thing you know, I was standing in a bathroom watching Mom fill a big bathtub with water. By the tub, there was a book called *The Birds of Montana*. Mom pointed to the window, where, just outside, a bird feeder hung from a chain. The chain was attached to a tree branch.

“So that’s why they call it a bird bath! You can look at birds while you’re in the bath!”

“You just have to be careful not to drop the book in the water!” Mom told me as she shut the door behind her. I spotted an alder flycatcher, a goldfinch, and a black-throated warbler. It was better than a movie!

I still had my hair wrapped in a towel when





I walked into the bedroom, in my pajamas. All the girl-cousins slept in the same room, on bunk beds. It was called the Rose Room because there was wallpaper with roses on it. Darcy-Lynn and I were on one bunk. She said I could have the top bunk, which was very nice of her. Leigh-Ann and Abigale were on the other. Blanche slept with Abigale since the lower bunk on that side of the room was a double.

The boys, Dustin and Wyatt, were in the other room. Baby Virginie slept with her parents. Everything was very well organized by Grandma Best. I liked how she made the beds. We all had matching pillows and the beds smelled like lavender.

“Grandma Best likes to make everything plumb perfect for the reunion,” said Abigale. “She even irons the pillowcases!”

We spoke for a little while. I asked about Winona.

“Where does she sleep?”

“She’s gone barn sour*,” Darcy-Lynn said. I



had no idea what this meant. Cowboy language was new to me. I loved it, but sometimes I needed a translator!

“She went back to her house for the night,” Leigh-Ann explained. “She said she prefers her own room.”

“I heard she didn’t even want to come to the reunion this year,” said Darcy-Lynn. “Grandma was fit to be tied*.”

I gasped. “I can’t imagine anyone not wanting to come here. It’s so wonderful!!”

Grandma Best knocked on the wall. “Girls, simmer down*. It’s bedtime!” But that only made us giggle and talk louder.

Eventually, I found myself yawning again and we turned out the lights. Though I was tired from my first day, I couldn’t sleep. I listened to the sounds outside the window. There were no cars or buses rattling the apartment like they do in the city. But it wasn’t quiet either.



The sound of crickets chirping and frogs
croaking on the pond was like a lullabye.

Country life sure is plumb.



Chapter Seven

A MEAN GOOSE AND A VERY TALL HORSE

“Which of you curtain crawlers* is going to fetch the eggs?” Grandma Best called out, pouring batter into a muffin pan.

Another batch of muffins was cooling on the windowsill. The sugary perfume of blueberries filled the kitchen. The big wooden table was set with plates and napkins and two thermoses. One thermos was labeled ‘Coffee,’ and the other said ‘Hot Chocolate.’

“Wow. You’ve been busy,” I said.

“I like to get up with the sun,” Grandma Best replied. She wore a kerchief around her neck. It was green checkered, and her hair was tied up in two braids. She looked like a grown-up cowgirl.

The cousins in the Rose Room had also been ‘up with the sun.’ We were too excited to sleep in.



The reunion was only three days long, and we had no time to waste! We'd already had two pillow fights, a thumb-wrestling tournament, and played a round of Go Fish. (Little Blanche won.)

Now we were hungry for breakfast!

"Is Mean Goose still there?" asked Darcy-Lynn.

"You betcha," said Grandma Best.

"What's Mean Goose?" I asked.

"It's not really mean," explained Abigale. "It's a guarder goose. Grandma Best trained it to protect the chicken coop. In the mountains, there's lots of snakes, skunks, and those pesky weasels. A guarder goose is big enough to scare most of the smaller predators off. And if there's somethin' bigger, like a fox or raccoon, the goose will make enough noise to wake us up."

"Especially *this* goose!" said Leigh-Ann. "Last year, it chased me around the flower garden. HONK! HONK! HONK! HONK!"

"You are such a scaredy-cat!" said Abigale.

"You betcha I am! That's why I am definitely



not going,” said Leigh-Ann. “Bye, cousins. Good luck with the goose! If I don’t see you, it was nice knowing y’all.”

“I’ll go,” I said. I wanted to learn everything I could about the ranch before it was time to go.

“Lainey the Brave,” said Grandma Best, patting my head.

The chicken coop was behind the barn, next to the flower garden. Abigale opened the gate. The chickens were pecking in the yard. I looked around nervously. No goose.

“Maybe we got lucky, and it’s sleeping?” Then I heard it. A deep low honking sound, which got louder and louder until, suddenly, there it was. The goose was white, with an orange beak and it was very, very, *big*. It was almost as big as Blanche! But much less friendly. I could understand how a skunk would run for its life. It ran towards us, honking.

“What do we do?” I asked, in a sudden panic.

“Stay put,” said Abigale. “Don’t worry. It



just likes to put on a show.”

I stayed put, feet glued to the ground, as the goose approached. It honked louder and opened its wings, which made it look even bigger. Then it leaned forward, turning its body into an arrow. It looked like it was ready to charge, beak-first, right at me.

“You’re doin’ great, Lainey,” said Abigale. “Your job is to keep Mean Goose busy, while I get the eggs.”

“How do I keep it busy...”

The goose honked loudly and lunged forward. I broke into a run. As the goose chased me around the garden, Abigale jetted into the coop. A minute later, she came out with a basket full of eggs.

“I got ’em!” she said, holding an egg in her hand.

When the goose noticed her, it ran towards her, but it was too late. Abigale was already closing the gate. The goose shook its feathers and disappeared behind the coop. I was finally safe.





“Okay, I may be Lainey the Brave, but that goose is scary!” I said, pouring hot chocolate into my cup. We were all around the breakfast table, gobbling down muffins, pancakes, fruit, and of course, eggs. The eggs tasted better than any egg I’d ever had in the city.

“There’s always tomorrow mornin’,” said Grandma Best.

“Tomorrow, you can get the eggs and *I’ll* let the goose chase me,” said Abigale.

I wasn’t sure about this plan. A plate of bacon went around the table. “You want some?” Grandpa Best asked Mom. “It’s from our neighbor’s ranch. They smoke it themselves.”

“No, thanks,” Mom said, patting her tummy.

“She’s full as a tick!*” Wayne teased her.

That’s a great expression, I thought. I couldn’t wait to use that with Alicia. I wondered if she’ll be able to understand me, now that I was learning to speak cowboy...





“How am I ever going to get up there?” I wondered, staring up at Shadow.

When I first saw her in the stalls, she was on the ground, resting in a pile of hay, her legs curled underneath her. Today, she was upright—a skyscraper with four legs. I bit my nails, nervously.

“Don’t be afraid,” Wayne said. “She’s no fence-wrecker*, this one. I promise ya she’s a good horse.”

Wayne was as good at teaching horseback riding as he was at teaching line dancing. First, he told me how to mount her. I had to put my foot in the stirrup*, then swing my leg over. Once I was up there, I was amazed.

“It’s so high!” I gripped Shadow with my thighs and held the horn* of the saddle tight.

“You’ll get used to it,” Wayne said.

Watching from a bench just outside the riding arena, Abigale, Darcy-Lynn, and Leigh-Ann cheered me on. They’d been riding since they were six!





To make the horse move, Wayne told me to dig in with my heels and make a clicking sound with my tongue.

“Don’t I have to say giddy-up*?”

This made all the cousins snicker. I was confused.

“This ain’t a cowboy movie, City Girl!” said Dustin.

“It’s more like ‘hup’ or ‘get-on,’” said Wayne, gently. Then he turned to the cousin crew. “Now stop rattlin’ my rookie rider! She needs to concentrate.”

They all piped down.

“First, we trot,” Wayne told me. “That’s how you get used to the movement of the horse. Next lesson, we can talk about a gallop.”

As I moved around the arena, Wayne said I was a natural. I loved Shadow already. I felt a bond. I stroked her mane to reward her for answering my commands. She made soft breathing sounds.

Suddenly, dark clouds appeared in the distance and there was a loud crack of thunder. Shadow whinnied and burst into a gallop.



“Hold on, Lainey!” Wayne shouted. I clutched the horn as tight as I could and stayed calm. Though Shadow only ran a couple yards, it felt like miles before she stopped.

“What happened?” I asked. My hands were still gripping the horn and I felt my heart still racing.

“She got spooked* by the thunder,” said Wayne. “Best we wrap up our lesson in case the storm heads our way.”

When I walked to the edge of the arena, my cousins patted me on the back.

“You did great, Lainey,” said Darcy-Lynn. “When a horse gets spooked, it can be scary. Y’all were cool as a cucumber in Grandma Best’s garden!”

“Yeah, we thought you might be eatin’ some gravel* but ya’ held on good,” added Dustin.

“Can we ride again tomorrow?” I asked.

Wayne looked surprised. “You sure? You can try another horse if you like. There’s Pancake and Fifi...”

“I’m not going to give up on Shadow that



easily. Besides, she's right. Thunder *is* scary!"

"You betcha," Wayne said. I helped him put Shadow back in her stable. We removed the saddle. Then I combed her. Leigh-Ann wove flowers into her mane. Shadow looked so pretty!

"Is this a stable or a hair salon!?" Dustin joked as he put his own horse, Runaway, back into the stall. "Who's up for a game of Hide-and-Seek?"

"Me!" We all screamed.

We decided who was going to be 'it' by drawing sticks. Blanche got the short stick. She crossed her arms and pouted. "I don't want to look all by myself." Tears welled in her eyes.

The other cousins rolled their eyes. I guess they were used to this sort of crisis. But I felt Blanche was right. It didn't seem fair having her count and look all by herself.

"I can play with her," I offered. "We'll be a team."

As Blanche and I counted, the rest of the cousin crew shot out among the trees and haystacks.



I could hear scuffling and snickering as we covered our eyes.

“One, two, three, five!” Blanche shouted.

“Eleventeen! Twee-million! Minus seven!” I yelled. Blanche laughed.

“Ready or not, here we come!”

We heard a burst of thunder. Then the wind picked up and dark clouds loomed over us. The storm had decided to come our way after all. I could hear loud tapping as raindrops hit the roof of the barn. Lightning flashed in the distance.

“What do we do now?” I asked, as the cousins all popped out of their hiding spots.

“Seek shelter!” shouted Leigh-Ann, jumping out from behind a haystack.

“To Cousins’ Castle!” shouted Darcy-Lynn, leaping down from a tree branch. Instead of heading towards the ranch house, she raced into the forest.

One by one, the other cousins followed, including Blanche. Billy Bob followed too, barking all the way.



“Come on, City Girl,” Dustin yelled, as he disappeared into the woods.

Thunder boomed again and I ran after them, into the forest. I hoped they knew where they were going.





Chapter Eight

THE SECRET OF COUSINS' CASTLE

The cabin appeared out of nowhere, like the cottage made of candy in the story of *Hansel and Gretel*. It was tucked in the forest, in a clearing surrounded by pines. *This* cottage was made of wood, with yellow shutters and wind chimes.

“What *is* this place?” I asked, taking off my wet sneakers. I placed them on a mat by the front door.

“We call it Cousins’ Castle because it’s *our* place. Just for us *curtain crawlers*.”

“Grandpa Best says it used to be a hunter’s cabin. Our parents made it their clubhouse when they were kids. Then Grandpa Best fixed it up to make it even better, for us.”

I looked around. There was a beanbag chair. Blanche had already burrowed in it, taking a comic



book from a wicker basket. Billy Bob plopped on the floor beside her. He stayed still while Abigale towed off his paws, which were muddy from our dash through the woods.

There was a small sofa, a table, and even a little kitchen, with the cutest yellow mini fridge. I could see why the cousins called it a castle. Dustin opened the fridge. “Thank you, Grandma Best!” he cheered, pulling out a pack of juice boxes.

“Catch!” he said, tossing them around. Then he took out crackers, cheese slices, and a bag of mini carrots.

The cabin had a shelf full of toys, games, and crafts. Darcy-Lynn took out a bead box. “Let’s make bracelets!”

Dustin and Abigale pulled out a game I knew, Falling Fortress. I perched on the window seat and watched the rain. A squirrel scurried across the trail. A goldfinch whizzed by.

“Nooooo!!” I heard Dustin shout, as the fortress tumbled.

“I told ya that last piece was going to be



tougher than a new saddle*,” Abigale grinned.

I smiled at their chatter. Once again, I felt that warm feeling of being part of something. ‘The cousin crew’ were my family now, and I felt so grateful.

After a while, Blanche fell asleep in her chair. I could hear her snoring.

“For a little thing, she sure makes a lot of noise,” said Dustin, plunging his hand into a tin of cookies on the counter. We all laughed. Leigh-Ann pinched Blanche’s nose to see if she’d stop. She didn’t. She just rolled over and started snoring again.

Aunt Martha showed up a minute later to check on us. “I brought y’all some slickers* for the walk home,” she said, dropping a pile of raincoats on the sofa. “Grandma Best says she wants you back at the spread* in an hour. She wants y’all dressed up pretty for the dance.”

Aunt Martha crouched down to check on Blanche. She was happy to see her napping. “She’ll be like popcorn in a skillet* at the dance tonight!”



“Look what we made for you, Lainey!” said Darcy-Lynn, holding out a friendship bracelet. “You can wear it to the dance!”

It had turquoise and gold beads and spelled “STEFF-COUSIN.” I smiled and put it on my wrist.

“Any more cookies?” Abigale asked. Dustin shook the box. Empty.

“Dustin! You ate them all?”

“Oops,” he said, with a shrug.

“Just as well,” said Abigale, patting her tummy. “We got to save up our hunger for tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?” I asked.

“The famous Best Beef Barbecue,” she replied. “Everyone has to prepare something.”

“We do?” I hadn’t heard of this before.

“Each family is a team. There’ll be prizes. The tastiest BBQ sauce, the best brisket, the yummiest ribs...,” explained Dustin.

“...My dad usually makes the best brisket!” Darcy-Lynn broke in. “It’s Grandpa Best’s favorite.”



He's very serious about his beef."

"Last year, Uncle Wayne made ribs," said Abigale. "Maybe this year, he and your mom will make ribs together!"

"I hope so," said Dustin, licking his lips. "Uncle Wayne's ribs are the best!"

"Right," I said. But I wasn't listening anymore. I was worrying about something. Something which, so far, had been kept hidden. What would happen if it came out? I didn't think it would be a problem. Wayne didn't think so either. Sure, Mom was a bit worried, but she worries about wet hair too, so I couldn't take her too seriously.

As I thought this, I must have sighed, or frowned, or done something to draw their attention, because suddenly, everyone was looking at me.

"Lainey, is everythin' alright?" Darcy-Lynn asked.

"Yep!" I nodded. I didn't want to spoil the moment. We were all having so much fun.



As if the sky agreed, the clouds vanished, and the sun reappeared.

“Who wants to play Falling Fortress with me?” I asked.

“I’m in!” said Dustin. “Me, too,” said Blanche, waking up.

As we played, I stopped worrying about my *secret*.

But it wouldn’t stay a secret for long.



Chapter Nine

BARN DANCE

By evening, the rain had cleared, and the moon was out. The barn was strung with little white lights. The giant doors were wide open. Country music filled the ranch. More family joined us, and neighbors, too. *This was lookin' to be a real barn burner*!*

Uncle Clive, who's Darcy-Lynn's dad, was DJ. He'd set up some speakers in the barn. The animals had all been moved to the bigger barn.

It was time to dance. I was ready with my fancy boots and a new outfit.

"Lainey, ain't you pretty as a pony*," said Grandma Best.

There were real musicians, too. Uncle Owen played harmonica and Winona played the fiddle. Holding a fiddle, she seemed a lot less scary than





the girl scribbling in her journal in the barn. Her brother Wyatt played something called a washtub bass*. It was the strangest thing!

During the dance, Grandma Best called the moves. I had no problem keeping up, thanks to my lessons with Wayne. Except this time, instead of dancing with seniors, I was dancing with my cousins, my aunts and uncles, my new step-family! I felt right at home.

Mom still had her two left feet—but nobody seemed to mind when she stepped on their toes.

I spotted a buffet table. I grabbed a paper plate and filled it with carrot sticks, ranch dip, a bunch of pasta salad, and a big hunk of Grandma Best’s homemade bread. Winona was there, too, filling her plate.

“I know your secret,” she said, smirking.

I was taken aback.

“What secret?” I asked.

“Vegetable, salad, pasta, eggs, cheese...”

“You got a problem with cheese?” I asked. I tried to sound as innocent as possible.



“But never, *ever*, any meat. No hot dogs, no burgers, no bacon at breakfast...”

What could I say? I was cornered.

“You’re vegetarian,” she whispered, so no one could hear.

When I didn’t reply, she started laughing. “Finally, I’m not the only rebel in the family.” Taking bites of her corn on the cob, she told me her story.

“When I told my parents that I’d stopped eating meat, they were annoyed. They said it was a phase and that I was just doing it to rebel. But when Grandpa Best found out, he got all owly* about it.” Winona frowned, and dropped her voice so it sounded low and rough, just like Grandpa Best.

“What’s your beef with beef? The Bests raise cattle. It’s what we do.”

Now I understood why Winona was all by herself, hiding out in the barn. She wasn’t ‘against fun,’ like Abigale said. She was just ‘against meat.’ Then I wondered. *Were the Bests going to be upset*



with Mom and me, too?

Mom had raised me vegetarian. I tried eating meat once, at school. It was ham. Another time with Alicia, I tasted some chicken. But I didn't really like it, so I just kept being vegetarian. Mom says it's good for the planet. But she also told me not to judge people who do eat meat. Alicia eats meat and I love her to bits. Wayne eats meat, too, but now that he's part of our family, he eats it a lot less. He said it feels healthier. I had hoped the Best family was still going to accept us, like Wayne did. But after talking to Winona, I wasn't so sure.

At this moment, I heard Grandpa Best bringing up the Best Beef Barbecue.

“Are you making something for the barbecue?” he asked Mom. Then he winked at me. “I suspect your mother cooks better than she dances.”

Mom laughed. Grandpa Best continued asking us about the barbecue.

“Wayne's a rib master, but I think you might be a brisket lady, or is it steak?”



Winona looked at me. She was curious about what I was going to say next.

“Steak!” I found myself blurting out.

Mom looked at me, surprised. Winona’s mouth dropped open.

“You're making steak?” Winona whispered, taking me aside.

“Yep,” I said. “You can help, if you want.”

Before I could outline my plan, Dustin tugged me on the arm. “Ready for the rematch?” He was holding a plastic horseshoe.

We left the barn dance and went outside. It was a warm summer night and the moon was so bright you could see clear across the fields. The lights of the barn twinkled. We played late-night tag and horseshoe toss until I thought my arm was going to fall off. On the last throw, I was close.

“Ah! Missed it by a hare*,” I said. “Or, maybe by a mare*!”

“You're getting good,” said Dustin.

“At horseshoes?”

“No! At speaking cowboy!”



Then I remembered the barbecue. I only hoped I'd be as good at making steak.



Chapter Ten

A FRIENDLY CHAT AND A WALK IN THE WOODS GONE WRONG

If my plan for the Best Beef Barbecue was going to work, I needed a special ingredient. It was important. Luckily, I knew just where to find it.

The next morning, I got up extra early. The cousins were still asleep. Our late night at the barn dance had them all tuckered out*.

I put my cowboy boots on, grabbed a basket, and headed outside to the vegetable garden.

The morning sun was soft and the grass was shiny with dew. I heard the soft clucking of the chickens as I passed the chicken coop. They were just beginning their day of hunting and pecking. Then I heard the honking.

Suddenly, Mean Goose was right in front of me, blocking my path. It seemed upset about



yesterday.

I took a breath. “Hello, Mean Goose!” I said. “How are you doing this morning?”

Mean Goose honked and moved closer.

“Don’t worry. I’m not a snake, or a raccoon, or a skunk. I’m just a girl, heading over to the vegetable garden.”

Mean Goose glanced at my basket suspiciously.

“Ah, you think I’m lying and that what I *really* want are some eggs for breakfast?”

Mean Goose honked loudly.

“No, this basket is for something else. It’s important. My family is depending on me. Like your chickens depend on you. And by the way, Mean Goose, even if I did want some eggs, I wouldn’t steal them, like Abigale did. I would ask you for permission. They’re your chickens. They’re your eggs. Right?”

This time, Mean Goose didn’t honk. It tilted its head and looked at me. It must have liked what I said because it spun around and waddled back to the coop.





“Thank you!” I called after it. Then I realized something.

“Wait!” I shouted.

Mean Goose kept waddling.

“On second thought, I still may need some eggs.”



“I did it!” I said, running into the kitchen with my basket. “I got the eggs!”

Grandma Best was at the counter, making coffee. Today she was wearing a blue kerchief with yellow flowers.

“How’s that?”

“I asked Mean Goose for permission!”

Grandma Best smiled. “The girl’s got gumption*! Now how’s your egg-cracking?”

“Ready for the rodeo*,” I replied. While Grandma Best set the table, I darted over to the pantry. Quickly, I put the secret ingredient I’d gathered from the vegetable garden in a safe hiding spot, in the second fridge in the pantry. Then I



brought the basket of eggs over to the table and started cracking. Grandma Best didn't notice a thing.

I was glad Mean Goose had helped me with my 'cover.' I didn't want anyone asking why I'd gone out to the vegetable garden with a basket.

After breakfast, it was time to cowgirl up*, because I had a second riding lesson with Shadow. This time, Darcy-Lynn rode near me, on Pancake, her horse. He was even taller than Shadow and 'golden as a griddle cake.'

It was so much fun riding with a partner. We even galloped together! After a while, the sun got hot.

"Let's not bake the horses*," said Wayne.

As we put our horses back, Grandma Best came into the stable.

"All right, little riders," she said, "I'm putting y'all in charge of a special mission."

"We can't do a mission today, Grandma Best. Remember? We're hiking," said Darcy-Lynn. "It's Lainey's last day and we want to show her the



Best Buckle.”

The Best Buckle is the name of a trail that runs into the mountains. It starts near the Cousins’ Castle. It goes up the mountainside, then loops down the other side of the ranch.

“Darcy-Lynn says there are rocks to climb and a waterfall where we can swim,” I said.

“I know. And all I am asking is that *while* you’re walking the trail, y’all pick some flowers. It’s the last meal we’ll all have together, and I want the tables lookin’ pretty.”

“We’d love to,” said Abigale.

Dustin shrugged. “Can we get a dollar a flower?”

“Always looking for a little pocket change, aren’t you, Dustin?”

He shrugged. “Yep.”

“Haven’t you heard the expression? The *Best* things in life are free,” I quipped.

Dustin laughed, “Good one, Cuz.”

I couldn’t help but notice that he didn’t call me *City Girl*.





“Look, it’s sage!” I said, leaning down to pick up a cluster of fuzzy green leaves.

“How do you know?” Abigale said, crouching down beside me.

“There’s a roof garden at my school. We *city folk* can grow stuff, too,” I said.

“I thought y’all just grew skyscrapers and concrete,” Dustin teased.

“This is parsley,” I said, spotting another leaf. “And chives, too!” I was amazed. My basket was full of wild herbs. And I knew exactly how I was going to use them...

“I thought Grandma Best wanted flowers?” Darcy-Lynn pointed out.

“Y’all have plenty,” I said, looking at their baskets. Abigale knew what the flowers were called. There was Prairie Smoke, and Silky Lupine and Fuzzy-tongued Penstemon. They were all so beautiful.

Blanche was picking flowers, too, but she kept putting them down to look at a bug or to



climb a rock, then forgetting them on the ground.

I stooped down to pick up one of Blanche's runaway flowers, and that's when I spotted the bird.

I recognized it right away. It was a yellow-billed cuckoo! I'd read about them in Grandma Best's bird book. Before I could get a closer look, it flew over to another tree. I followed it from tree to tree, hoping to hear it sing.

“Stay put, little birdie!”

Finally, the bird perched on the edge of a low branch and started to sing. The book said that sometimes their cuckooing is a warning. It means there's a storm on the way. I looked up at the sky. Not a cloud. I shrugged. Maybe it was just singing for me.

When the bird finished its song, it flew up into the sky and disappeared. I looked around, ready to head back to my cousins, when I realized something. *I had no idea where I was.* Though I'd only followed the bird a few yards, the forest surrounded me. The trees all looked the same.





From which direction had I come? Where was the trail I was on with my cousins?

“Hello!” I shouted through the trees. “I’m over here. Dustin? Darcy-Lynn?”

But there was no response. My heart started beating fast.

I was lost.



Chapter Eleven

SAVE THE BEST FOR LAST

Try not to panic, I told myself. I am Lainey the Brave! I got gumption! I got sand!

I took a moment to think about my situation. We'd only been walking fifteen minutes or so. The ranch couldn't be that far. *If Mom and I can find our way home on the subway in Washington D.C., I can surely find my way back to the trail.*

I looked at where the sun was in the sky. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Then I remembered the mountains—which side they were on as we were walking. I took baby steps forward, trying to find signs of the trail. It wasn't easy. One tree looked the same as the next.

That's when I saw it, lying on a rock, like a little gift. *Blanche's runaway flower!* The flowers were like breadcrumbs. Flower by flower, I found



my way back to the trail. When the flowers ran out, I heard a dog barking...Billy Bob! He jumped and ran circles around me. Together we walked back to the ranch. When we got there, my cousins were waiting by the gates.

“We were just about to send out a search party!” Dustin cried.

“It wasn’t that long, was it?”

“No, but still, we were worried,” said Abigale.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Thanks to Blanche.”

“Me?” Blanche’s eyes widened with excitement.

“What did I do?”

I told everyone about the runaway flowers being like breadcrumbs, marking the path, like in *Hansel and Gretel*. Grandma Best said she’d put that in her journal, ‘The *Best* Family Stories.’

“And you’re just in time, too,” said Grandpa Best, striding over to us. He was wearing another one of his famous silly aprons.

“It’s barbecue time!” He clapped his hands together.

Winona looked at me.



“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asked.

I nodded. “Wild horses couldn’t stop me*!”

With my basket full of herbs, Wayne, Mom, Winona, and I headed to the kitchen. I pulled out my secret ingredient from the fridge in the pantry. Winona looked surprised.

“Your secret ingredient is cauliflower?”

“Yep. I picked a bunch from the vegetable garden. Grandma Best had plenty.”

“How you gonna make a steak outta cauliflower?” Winona asked.

“You’ll see,” I said.

Mom cut the cauliflower into big thick slices. We rubbed each ‘steak’ with butter and spice, then threw them on the barbecue. When the cauliflower steaks were cooked, we put them on a platter and drizzled them with a generous amount of *Montana Meadow* sauce. That’s what we called the mixture of herbs I’d found in the forest.

“Delicious,” said Winona, tasting the sauce. *But would Grandpa Best feel the same?*





We were all gathered at the long table that Grandma Best had set up outside.

“And ya got all these herbs from the forest right around here?” Grandma Best asked, licking her fork.

“Yep,” I said. “It was Winona’s idea to add lime juice, but the chopped jalapeno was *all me*. I’d remembered how Wayne always puts hot sauce on his pizza. He said spicing things up was a family tradition.”

“Sure as sugar,” said Grandma Best, “We Bests do love a little heat!”

By now, all the cousins knew my secret. Mom and I were vegetarian. But instead of being shocked, they were curious. I explained how I was vegetarian, not vegan—which means I eat eggs and cheese.

“Is your cat vegetarian, too?” asked Darcy-Lynn.

“No. Pistachio loves mice-hunting too much,”





I replied. My cousins laughed.

Winona laughed, too. Then she turned to Grandpa Best. He was seated at the head of the table.

“So, Grandpa Best, how does it feel, havin’ *three* vegetarians in the family?”

Everyone turned to him, holding their breath.

He lifted up a forkful of cauliflower steak and smacked his lips.

“Best rabbit food I ever did eat.”



Chapter Twelve

A BRIGHT LIGHT

It was our last day at the Best Family Ranch. Our bags were on the driveway, next to the car.

Little Blanche walked up to me. She had tears in her eyes.

“Bye, Lainey. You’re the best steff-cousin in the world.”

“You too, Blanche,” I said, giving her a hug. Then I heard a horse whinny. I turned around.

“Shadow!”

“Thought you’d want to say good-bye,” said Darcy-Lynn, leading Shadow by the reins.

I kissed Shadow on the snout. “Good-bye, girl. Please don’t forget about me.” When I said this, Darcy-Lynn started crying.

“I wish you didn’t live so far away,” said Leigh-Ann. She had tears in her eyes, too. Now,



I'm normally a happy person, but *sheesh*, it's hard not to cry when everyone around you is a bawlin' mess!

"Bye, cuz," said Dustin, joining us with Billy Bob at his heels. "I'll think of you every time I get a plastic horseshoe in the head."

I grinned. At least Dustin wasn't crying. Then I remembered something.

"Hey everyone! We don't have to wait until next year, because there's Wayne and Mom's wedding! It's only three months away and it's going to be here at the ranch! That's not too long!"

Blanche held up four fingers. "Just *twee* months?"

I put down one of her fingers and she giggled. Mom leaned down and gave me a hug.

"Always a bright light," she whispered in my ear.

In the car, on the way to the airport, I looked down at my cowboy boots. They were already looking worn from all my adventures.

I felt like a true cowgirl.



Glossary

*Many words have more than one meaning. Here are the definitions of words marked with this symbol * (an asterisk) as they are used in this story.*

Bake the horses: *riding too fast, long, or hard*

Barn burner: *a very exciting event*

Barn sour: *a horse that loves his stall*

Cowgirl up: *'deal with it,' instead of standing around and whining*

Curtain crawlers: *a young child*

Do-si-do: *a movement in a folk dance.*

Two dancers approach each other, pass back-to-back, and return to their original positions

Dung: *animal droppings*

Eating gravel: *to be thrown from a horse*

Fence-wrecker: *a horse that breaks the fence as he runs away*

Fit to be tied: *angry*

Full as a tick: *when you ate too much*



Giddy-up: *to go ahead, or go faster*
Got sand: *has guts or determination*
Gumption: *has guts or determination*
Hit the hay: *bedtime*
Hoedown: *a social gathering at which
lively folk dancing takes place*
Horn: *a handgrip formed by the raised
front part of a saddle*
Howdy: *hello*
Let her buck: *leave her alone*
Missed by a hare: *missed by a very
small amount*
Missed by a mare: *Lainey is making up her
own expression by changing 'hare' to
'mare,' meaning she missed it by a lot—
the size of a grown-up horse*
Owly: *cranky, in a bad mood*
Plumb: *can be used on its own, to mean that
something is amazing, or used with
another word to make something else
even better (plumb perfect)*
Popcorn in a skillet: *constantly busy and
moving about*



Pretty as a pony: *a made-up phrase in the spirit of several country expressions, such as “Stubborn as a mule,” or “Pretty as a picture.” Expressions come from people and happen over time.*

Start your own!

Ready for the rodeo: *you’re ready for the main event*

Simmer down: *to become calm*

Slickers: *raincoats*

Smarter than a cow: *intelligent*

Spooked: *scared*

Spread: *a large ranch, the Main House*

Stirrup: *a ring that holds the foot of the rider*

Tougher than a new saddle: *a made-up expression meaning very hard or difficult*

Tuckered out: *very tired*

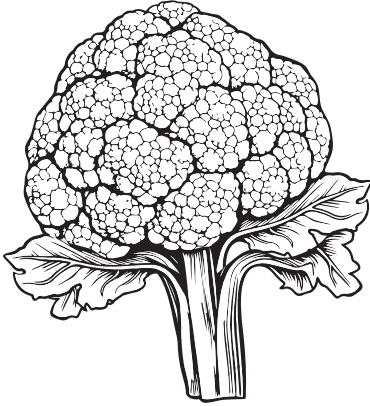
Washtub bass: *a stringed instrument used in folk music*

Wild horses couldn’t stop me: *You can’t be stopped*

Yackin’: *talking a lot*

You betcha: *Yes, you can be sure of it*





Cauliflower Steak with Montana Meadow Sauce

The recipe Lainey whipped up for the Best Family Barbecue is a real thing, we promise you. Here's how you make it.

Montana Meadow Sauce

The sauce starts with plain yogurt (1 cup), lemon juice (2 tbsp), and a bunch of fresh herbs, like parsley, chives, basil, coriander, or whatever you have on hand (1 cup). Then toss in some chopped garlic and some chopped hot chili peppers, if you like things spicy, like the Bests do.

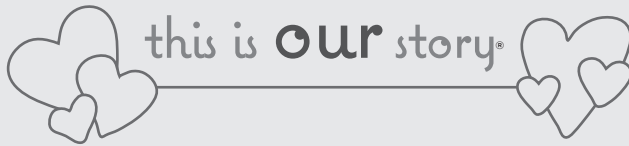
The Cauliflower Steak

Cut the cauliflower in thick slabs so it looks like a steak - then rub with oil and salt and pepper and any other spice you like, and slap on a hot grill and cook! When the cauliflower is tender and well-browned, remove, place on a plate, and drizzle with Montana Meadow Sauce.

You can even eat it with your fingers, and the hard bits of stalk are almost like the bone of a steak.

Y'all try it! It's plumb tasty.





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And have we got a story to tell.

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Our dreams have no limits, our voices echo around every corner, and we have the strongest belief that we can make anything and everything possible with our greatest gift: imagination.

This is our time. This is our story.

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About the Author

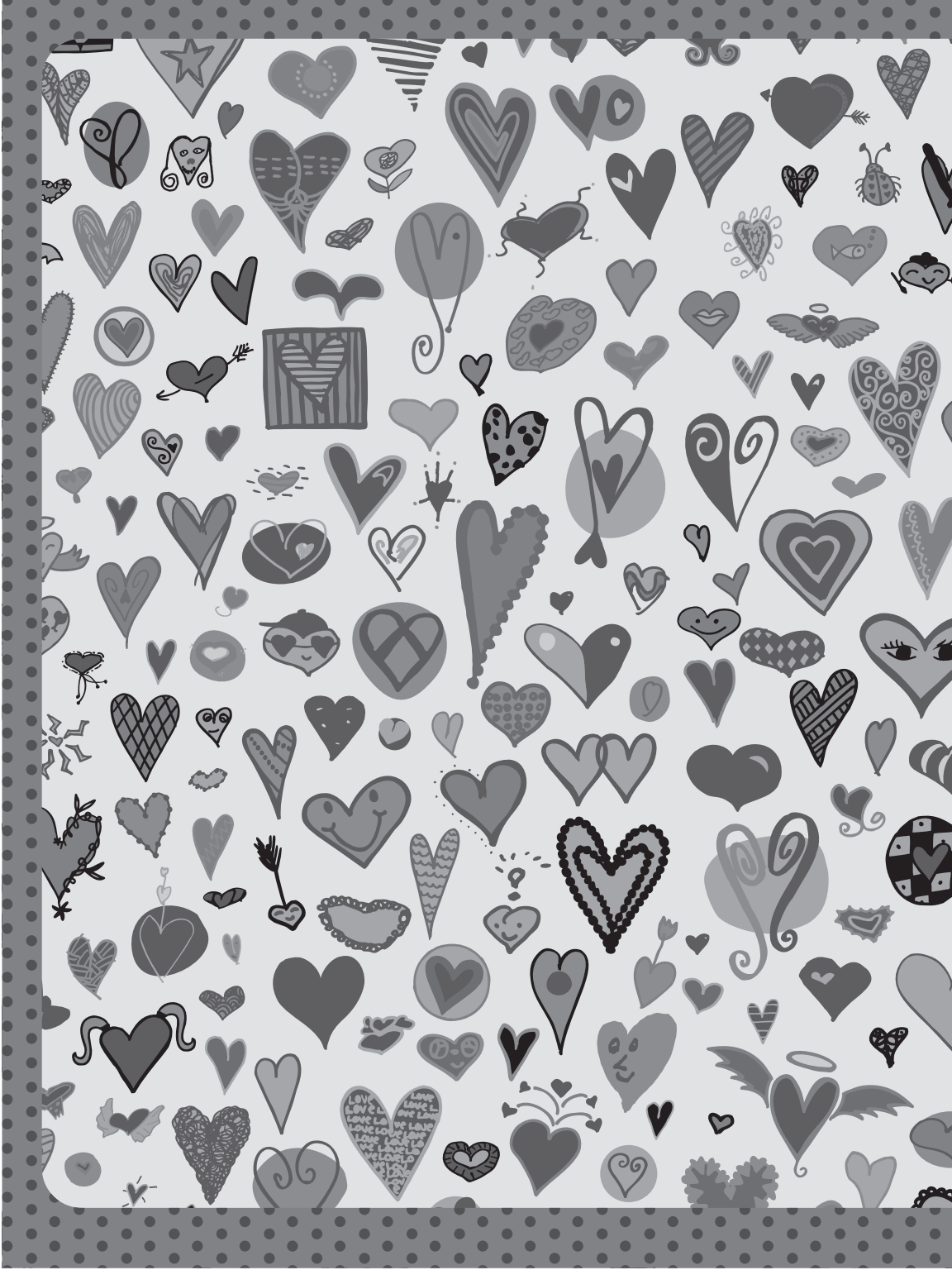
Laura Leigh Motte is a Montreal-based screenwriter and author. When her son was in grade four, she took him horseback riding. During the lesson, the horse got spooked and bolted. Luckily, her son stayed calm and held on tight! She was so proud. Life's a wild ride, don't "get tossed and eat gravel!" Stay brave, like Lainey.

About the Illustrator

Passionate about drawing from an early age, Géraldine Charette decided to pursue her studies in computer multimedia in order to further develop her style and technique. Her favorite themes to explore in her illustrations are fashion and urban life. In her free time, Géraldine loves to paint and travel. She is passionate about horses and loves spending time at the stable. It's where she feels most at peace and gives her time to think and fuel her creativity.



Best of the West became the book that you are holding in your hands with the assistance of the talented people at Maison Battat Inc., including Joe Battat, Dany Battat, Andrew Shapiro, Loredana Ramacieri, Sandy Jacinto, Veronique Casavant, Alexandra Bonfa, Laurie Gaudreau-Levesque, Ananda Guarany, Cynthia Lopez, Marie-Sophia Markos, Valentina Quan, Pamela Shrimpton, Marius Jivoin, Natalie Cohen, and Zeynep Yasar.



Best of the West

Lainey™ is going west, to a family ranch in Montana. She'll meet new cousins, make new animal friends, and face new challenges, too.

Is she nervous? Not a chance! Our brave, joyful heroine is ready to dive in and experience it all. After all, Lainey has always dreamed of being a cowgirl.

Her chance has finally arrived. Nothing will get in her way—not a mean goose, a spooked horse, or a grandpa with very strong opinions.

Y'all ready for the ride?

It's impossible to separate Our Generation® characters from the generation of kids who read about and play with them, for they are one and the same. They're changing the world by making their households greener. They're baking cupcakes to help charities. They're writing in their journals, practicing for recitals, doing cartwheels down the block and giggling with their friends until they can hardly breathe. Our Generation is about kids growing up together. "This is our story" reflects the community of these amazing kids as they laugh, learn and create the narrative of their own generation.

Ages 7 and up

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