

# Robin Lee HATCHER



## *Love Without End*

A Kings Meadow Romance

### **Anna - 1944**

Hunger twisted Anna McKenna's belly as she followed the deer track, leading the blood bay colt behind her. She didn't know where she was, and many days of walking hadn't lessened her fear that someone followed her. Every sound in the forest made her heart leap into her throat. Were they looking for her, the relatives who'd taken her in, claiming to want to give her a home? Would she starve to death before she found her way back to civilization? Would someone manage to take Shiloh's Star from her no matter how far she traveled?

*"Trust and listen,"* Mama's voice seemed to whisper in her ear. *"Trust and listen."*

Thoughts of her mama caused tears to spring to her eyes. Thoughts of Daddy too. Both of them were gone now. Daddy killed in the war. Mama of pneumonia, the doctor had said, but Anna was pretty sure Mama died of a broken heart. The red colt had been a gift from her parents. Shiloh's Star was all she had left of them, and she wasn't gonna let anybody take him from her. Not anybody. Including Cousin Luther.

Anna dashed away the tears with her fingertips, and as she did so, the pine trees parted and the path spilled onto a rocky plateau overlooking a beautiful emerald-colored valley. It was shaped like the boomerang she'd once seen in a general store. To her left in the distance, she saw what looked to be a small town. Much closer and on the opposite end of the curve, she saw a house, barn, and outbuildings, cattle grazing in high grass.

God willing, she would get something to eat and maybe have one good night of sleep before she and the colt moved on.

## Chapter 1

*Boise, Idaho, Spring 2014*

Chet Leonard watched the automatic doors leading from the concourses of the Boise airport, hoping he would recognize Nana Anna when she came into view.

How much could she have changed in ten years? Perhaps a lot. The last time he'd seen her was about a decade ago when he and his family took a vacation to Disney World in Florida. They'd taken one day off from rides and games to spend an afternoon with Anna and her husband Walter.

Anna McKenna wasn't any blood relation to the Leonards, but Chet considered her family all the same. And now, after the death of her husband, she was coming home to Idaho. Coming home to live once more on the Leonard ranch. A place she belonged.

He caught sight of a white-haired woman in a wheelchair. Was that her? If so, he might need to rethink where she would stay. The automatic doors opened and he took a step forward, then stopped. It wasn't Anna. He could see that now. Anna McKenna was in her eighties, but aging didn't change a person's looks as much as that.

"Chet Leonard. Aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

His gaze moved a few steps beyond the woman in the wheelchair. A grin split his face. *This* was Nana Anna. Older, yes, from the last time he was with her, but he would know that smile and those merry blue-gray eyes anywhere. Not to mention that dark red hair—which these days came from a bottle.

A few quick strides carried him to her, and without any forethought, he lifted her feet off the floor as he gave her a tight hug. She laughed. He recognized that about her too. Setting her on her feet again and holding her at arms' length, he said, "You made it here fine, I see."

"Of course I did." She patted her collarbone. "And my, my. I swear you grew taller since I last saw you."

"I doubt it. I stopped growing years ago, Nana Anna."

Color bloomed in her cheeks. "Goodness gracious. It's good to be called that to my face again. I've missed it."

He held out his hand to take her small carry-on. "Let's go down to baggage claim. I assume you've got some bags checked."

"I do, indeed."

Chet took Anna by the crook of her arm, and they walked toward the escalator. "Can't believe how much this airport has changed," Anna said on the ride down. He looked around. "Yeah. Guess it's a lot different from the last time you were here."

"I expect more than this airport's different. Time marches on."

Chet nodded.

They stepped off the escalator in companionable silence and followed other passengers toward the luggage carousels.

"Do you want to sit down while we wait?" he asked her.

"No, thank you. Been sitting too many hours as it is. Need some movement in my giddy-up."

He grinned, remembering Anna as she'd been thirty years ago, before she married Walter Cunningham and moved to Florida. Already in her fifties—which had seemed ancient to Chet at the time—she'd been as active and hardworking as any man they had on the ranch. She could ride a horse all day, make a campfire, sleep on the ground, mend fences, and fix a mean breakfast.

"Chet?"

"Yes?"

"I know I said it over the phone, but I want you to know how sorry I am about all that's happened to you in the last few years. Rick and Marsha and all."

He nodded, words caught in his throat. He'd learned there was no escaping the sadness when it swept over him. He could go days without consciously thinking about the son who'd died in a car crash or the marriage that had ended despite his attempts to salvage it. But the memories and the heartache were there all the same, hidden in a deep corner of his heart.

Anna laid a wrinkled hand on his forearm. "One day at a time, Chet. That's all God asks of any of us. Just one day at a time."

Chet nodded again.

The warning light flashed and a loud beep sounded, then the conveyor belt went into motion. A short while later, bags appeared and plopped onto the oval-shaped carousel.

"What am I looking for?" Chet asked.

"Two purple bags with a bright red band around each one."

Black suitcases. Green duffel bags. Small and large boxes. One after another dropped into view. And then at last the awaited purple bags. The color was brighter than any other he'd seen so far. Appropriate for the colorful, much-beloved Nana Anna.

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At the start of their drive north, Anna expressed amazement at how much Boise had grown in the years she'd been away, but when they passed through Kings Meadow a little better than an hour later, she smiled and said, "This place hasn't changed all that much, has it?"

"You might be surprised. New library. New schools. New houses. We even have a couple of subdivisions. More changes than you'd think." He glanced at his passenger.

Anna's eyes were awash with tears, though her smile was broad. "It's good to come home, Chet. No place else ever felt quite right to me, no matter how much I loved Walter. Thanks for letting an old woman come back."

Chet felt a little choked up himself. Anna McKenna was the nearest thing to a grandmother—*great*-grandmother—his boys would ever know. Though she might not realize it, she was the one doing him a favor, not the other way around. Sam and Pete could use a woman in their lives again. Chet did his best, but he was a poor replacement for the mother who'd abandoned them.

It took another twenty minutes to reach the Leonard Ranch, their land tucked between pine covered mountains to the north, east, and west.

"Look at that," Anna whispered as the truck passed beneath the sign proclaiming: *Leonard Ranch Quarter Horses*. "Would you look at that? Prettiest sight I ever did see. And you've got several new outbuildings, too."

By the time Chet's black Ford pulled up to the house, Sam and Pete were standing outside.

A soft gasp escaped Anna, and she covered her mouth with one hand. When she lowered it again, she said, "Look at those boys. They've grown so tall since you came to visit me and Walter in Florida. They look like you when you were their age. The photos you've emailed didn't do them justice."

"Yeah, they're Leonards to the core. No doubt about it. But I see more of my dad than me in Sam."

"And there's lots of Abe in Pete. I didn't know your grandfather when he was sixteen, of course, but I can still see it."

Chet chuckled. "Nothing wrong with your eyesight, is there, Anna?"

"Not a blessed thing. Eighty-four and almost perfect vision. 'Cept when I'm reading. Need glasses when I want to read fine print."

"So do I." Chet opened the door and hopped down from the cab. With quick strides, he rounded the front of the truck, opened the passenger door, and helped Anna descend. Then he took her by the arm and drew her toward the house. "Sam and Pete, do you remember Ms. McKenna?"

Sam stepped forward. "I remember. You showed us an alligator sunning himself near the road."

"Gracious. I'd forgotten that. But I'm not surprised a boy of seven would remember."

Sam leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Good to see you again, Ms. McKenna."

"I'd prefer to be Nana Anna to you boys. Or just Anna, if you're not comfortable with that."

"Sure."

"We're glad you're here ... Nana Anna." Pete repeated the actions of his older brother.

Sam said, "I'll get your bags."

Chet watched his older son stride toward the pickup, then said, "Anna, you'll be staying in the main house with us until we can clear out the cottage. To be honest, it hasn't been a guest house since that first year after you moved away. We've used it for storage ever since you left. There's quite a collection of junk after three decades."

"That's fine with me. If you're sure I won't be in the way."

"Not possible. You're family. You belong with us." He gave her another grin. Then the sound of wheels on gravel drew his attention back to the long driveway. An older model blue sedan was approaching. "Excuse me, Anna. I'd best see who that is. Pete, you show Nana Anna into the house. I'll be along soon."

The blue car came to a halt near the barn. Chet was about halfway to it when the driver's door opened, and an attractive woman got out. Tall and lithe, she had long, curly dark brown hair, the sides caught back with clips. She was a stranger. If they'd met before, he would remember her.

She saw his approach and lifted a hand to shade her eyes from the afternoon sun. "Mr. Leonard?"

"That's me, ma'am. How can I help you?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly and she worried her lower lip with her teeth before answering, "It's about a horse."

"We've got plenty for sale. What are you—"

"No. No, I don't want to buy a horse. We ... I mean, my daughter ... she was given a horse."

Chet stifled a groan, pretty sure he knew what was coming.

"It's a wild horse. Well, not a wild horse like the mustangs you read about in the newspaper, but almost the same thing. Anyway, it needs gentled and my daughter needs to learn how to work with it. My friend said you were the man to see. Chet Leonard, right?"

Maybe one of his buddies was playing a prank on him. "Who's your friend?"

"Janet Dunn."

Not a prank, then. Janet Dunn went to his church, and he knew her well. She wasn't the prankster type.

"I ... we ... my daughter and I are staying with Janet for ... for a while."

She was a pretty thing. No doubt about it. But she also looked as skittish as a green-broke colt. The way her voice broke. The way her eyes couldn't stay on him more than a second or two at a time. "Listen, Miss ...?" He paused and waited for her to answer.

"Welch. Kimberly Welch."

"Miss Welch, I don't do that sort of thing anymore. Too much work around the ranch as it is."

"Please, Mr. Leonard. Please don't decide against it so quickly. Life has been hard in the last few years for my daughter. Her father died suddenly and ... and we had to move from our home. We've had to move more than once in the last three years." She spoke rapidly, as if terrified he would interrupt to refuse again. "My daughter's lost so much. Her father. Her friends. Her school. I can't bear for her to lose one thing more. Tara's always wanted a horse, and now this gelding has been given to her by a friend of Janet's. Only I don't know the first thing about horses. I don't know if he is in good health or safe for her to be around or ... or anything."

Against his better judgment, Chet asked, "How old is the horse, Ms. Welch?"

"He's three, I think."

"And why did you call him a wild horse?"

"As I understand it, he was born on a ranch over near the ... what are they called? The Owyhee Mountains. He and the other horses on the ranch ran free over hundreds of acres. We were told this colt had no contact with humans for the first two years of his life. Then the man who bought him used punishment rather than patience and kindness to try to break him. I'm not sure how the horse went from that man to Janet's friend, but in the end, he was gifted to my daughter. And if Tara has to give him up now, it will break her heart. Please, Mr. Leonard. Don't make me have to break her heart all over again."

Good sense demanded he send Kimberly Welch packing. Good sense told him that he didn't have time to look at her gelding, let alone to train a horse that had been mistreated much less a rider who knew little or nothing about horses. But he always had been a sucker for a damsel in distress, and he couldn't say no to the pleading look in this woman's eyes. "All right. I'll have a look at him and talk to your daughter. Then I'll make my decision. No promises. Would tomorrow be okay?"

"Tomorrow would be fine. Thank you, Mr. Leonard. Thank you so very much."

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