

DOUBLE S RANCH, BOOK 3

# PEACE *in the* VALLEY

A Novel

A man wearing a black cowboy hat, a purple and white plaid shirt, and blue jeans is sitting on a rocky ledge. He is playing an acoustic guitar. The background is a vast, scenic view of a valley with rolling green hills, scattered trees, and a small town in the distance. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

RUTH LOGAN HERNE

Praise for  
*The Double S Ranch Series*

"Herne's delightfully charming writing voice shines in her latest novel . . . meaningful themes of reconciliation, atonement, and forgiveness are treated with grace."

—ROMANTIC TIMES, *Back in the Saddle* review

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"Heart and hope combine in Ruth Logan Herne's sweet tale of old wounds and ties that bind. Where faith and forgiveness are present, old scars can be healed and new love can bloom. Sometimes, you really can go home again."

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PEACE  
*in the*  
VALLEY

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MULTNOMAH

## PEACE IN THE VALLEY

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*To Zach: Son #3*

*May you always find your own peace  
in the valley, may you always feel the  
warmth of God's love giving you  
strength and faith as it shines from  
above, and may you be blessed with  
all the joys a roller-coaster life allows.*

*All of your days.*

*With love, Mom*



For once in his life, Trey Walker Stafford had aced his two older brothers. The fact that he had to risk his life and offer up a chunk of his liver to claim the title made it a dubious honor.

The irony wasn't lost on Trey as he drove his packed SUV west on I-90 through Central Washington. The thought that of Sam Stafford's three sons, it was the orphaned-nephew-turned-adopted son whose DNA provided the best possible outcome for his adoptive father fit today's reality TV scenarios too well.

But then their lives up to this point had seemed like a reality television show, so why change now?

The fingers of his left hand thrummed a senseless beat on the leather steering wheel. He drove the roads he'd known for so long, intent on getting back to the ranch and the man who'd rescued him from squalor twenty-five years before. He meant to do whatever he could to help his father. Not because he harbored some kind of death wish. Surgery, painful recovery, and possible death weren't on his agenda. His agent had made that clear multiple times during the past week, and by every possible available media.

*"You'd risk everything you've earned, everything you have, your home." Ed Boddy ticked off his fingers as he listed Trey's potential downfall. "That ranch you love, tucked in the hills of Northern Tennessee, your music, your life. And all to help the man who threw you out of the house because you loved music? You're a better man than I am, Trey. That's for sure."*

He wasn't better. He knew that. He was guilt ridden and fairly vacant inside, like one of those black holes yawning wide in an endless universe. Solid. Dense. Yet empty. And he'd felt that way for as long as he could remember.

Sam hadn't thrown him out because he loved music. He'd cast him aside because Sam had watched the downside of fame claim the life of his younger sister and her husband. He'd seen what life in the spotlight could do. Sam knew it wasn't pretty. But Trey had shrugged off his father's concerns. Growing up knowing the worst of the music industry firsthand had left him with a powerful need to prove it could be done the right way. Clean. Open. Honest. The crazy rich part wasn't something he'd planned. It just kind of happened along the way.

*"Poor little boy."*

The voice. *Her* voice, the voice of his mother, Sandra Lee Stafford. Beloved on her early country music recordings, that slow-churned alto turned utterly scathing when it came to her little boy.

She'd stood over him, smelling bad and looking hateful, and that's all Trey envisioned anytime someone mentioned his mother. They said a three-year-old doesn't have the capacity to remember actual events, that they might have snatches of recall, here and there. Whoever *they* were, they were plumb stupid, because Trey remembered enough. Too much.

*"There ain't no one in this world 'bout to feel sorry for you, Trey-Trey. Least of all, me."*

He must have been crying. He couldn't remember the tears, but he remembered the wetness on his face.

And then she was gone, and his father was gone, and the next thing he knew, Sam Stafford strode into that police

station. Larger than life, Sam had scooped up Trey and taken him home.

And so it began, and here's where it might end: Trey, donating part of his liver to keep Sam Stafford alive. A good Christian man would go forward boldly, embracing the opportunity. Trey marked that up as another out-and-out failure because he was Christian to a fault on most things . . .

But not this.

His internal guilt spiked like an overwound E string, but Trey spent so much of his life feeling guilty that today shouldn't be any different. But this change—*this summer*—would be life and death. And that, right there, made a difference.

He exited the highway and took the right-hand turn leading up the hill, away from Gray's Glen, the town he grew up in. Broad fields stretched along either side, filled with lush grass and gray-green sagebrush. The sagebrush grew thicker as the meadows climbed. Dark red cattle dotted the upper pastures like a generous sprinkling of cayenne pepper on steamed broccoli.

He was hungry.

Tired.

Nervous?

Yes.

The Ellensburg deejay segued into Trey's newest single in a way that made him cringe. "Ya wanna talk a Cinderella cowboy story? We've got it right here, as Central Washington's own Trey Walker tugs the heartstrings while he rockets up the charts again with 'You Only Live Once.'"

Trey shut the radio off.

He had no desire to hear himself croon sage words of advice to trusting fans. They thought he understood their plight.

He didn't.

They sensed he had a heart of gold.

Wrong again.

They believed in him, in his music, his calling, his faith.

How he wished he could believe in himself. He—

The aged, dark blue van came out of nowhere. Trey hit the brakes too late.

The van shot into the intersection.

Trey cut the wheel and prayed. The SUV squealed in protest.

The van turned too, away from him, in a desperate move to avoid the crash. The maneuver worked, but then the van raced up the embankment and tipped up and over before landing on its side in the small creek running into the glen.

Trey shoved the SUV into park and jumped out. He raced across the two-lane country road, jumped onto the hill, and hit 911 on his phone at the same time. He shouted quick facts to the dispatcher as he scaled the small but steep incline. "We've got a van overturned into Chudney's Creek north of the I-90 turnoff on Buell Road, just past the intersection of East Chelan."

He didn't wait for a response as he crested the creek bank. He leaped into the water and yanked himself up onto the side front of the tipped van. Wet fingers made the grip difficult, but once he gained a leg up, he was able to pull himself the rest of the way. He reached down to jerk open the van door.

It wouldn't budge.

The driver—a woman—was facing away from him.

She didn't move. Didn't wiggle. Didn't—

His heart stopped. He pounded on the door, not knowing what else to do, then realized he might be able to get in

through the back hatch. He jumped down and rushed through the knee-deep water, then bent and grabbed the latch on the back hatch.

It opened. He breathed out, glad to have access to the van and the driver.

His relief was short lived. The entire back of the van was filled with floral debris. Upended plants, baskets, planters, and trays of seedlings blocked his way. Utter destruction filled the banged-up van from top to bottom.

“Noooo.” The single drawn-out word came from the front of the van, which meant the driver was alive. Knowing that gave his heart reason to keep on beating.

He looked up.

If despair had a face, it was the one he saw right now as the driver spotted the complete wreckage. “Unlock your door,” he ordered, then slogged back through the water. He climbed up again and braced himself. The van’s angle made opening the door tough. Its weight worked against him, but instinct dictated he needed to get her out of the van. And what if there was a passenger?

He pushed down on his heels and tugged the door upright. It blocked his view, and he didn’t have the best footing, but he hung on for dear life. “Can you climb out? I’m afraid to let go of the door to help you; it might fall and hit you.”

“I can climb.”

Trey prayed.

He doubted the effectiveness, because while *he* believed in God, he was pretty sure God had taken a detour somewhere north of his Tennessee ranch. But then, why wouldn’t he?

He and God knew the truth. Trey was here seeking absolution. Seeking . . . something. Something to fill the void

left by aching guilt. He didn't know what he was looking for, exactly. He just knew he'd been searching for what seemed like a long, long time.

Nothing yet.

Trey wasn't stupid. The prospects of finding peace in the broad, lush green valley of Central Washington were slim to none. He wasn't being pessimistic. It's just how things rolled these days.

A hand appeared not far from his feet. Then another hand came through the opening, followed by a mass of long gold-and-brown hair. The loose hair tumbled over the side of the van. She turned his way and the hair was now accompanied by a face.

An absolutely beautiful, very angry face.

Great.

He didn't sigh and point out the obvious as sirens approached them from the town below. She should have stopped at the intersection. He had the right-of-way.

A light blue T-shirt emerged, followed by a green-and-blue skirt decked out in swirls. The driver didn't spare him another look. She hopped off the side of the van into the water.

Her skirt billowed, then acted like a wick, drawing muddy creek water up like a high-priced paper towel. The wet skirt plastered itself to her legs. She growled, wrenched the skirt up with both hands, and strode through the water before stopping at the open back hatch.

He almost couldn't bear to watch, except he couldn't turn away. He'd seen the wreckage inside the van. It was a scene of utter destruction with months of someone's hard work destroyed.

Hers?

Maybe.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she surveyed the mess. No sobs, no whining, no yelling, just a steady flow of silent outpouring heartbreak.

The urge to help overcame him, but how?

Maybe she was in shock.

That cheered him, because if she was, then the accident hadn't just ruined her life. Shock, at least, was medically treatable.

There were no special warming blankets or mugs of coffee to heal heartbreak. He knew that.

He let the door ease shut, then jumped into the water, as his future sister-in-law, Angelina, rolled to a stop in her new deputy's car. "Trey?" She looked astounded to see him in the creek, but then her eyes widened and her expression changed to one of even deeper concern. "Lucy? Oh my gosh, Lucy, are you all right?" An ambulance pulled up behind Angelina's car.

Angelina didn't waste any more time on Trey. She hurried to the creek bank and held out her hand to the woman. "Come on, honey, come out of there. What on earth happened?"

The woman—Lucy—took Angelina's hand and let her tug her toward the first dry ledge of the bank before she pointed his way. "He blew through the stop sign in typical Stafford fashion. Fast and furious, with no regard for rules or anyone else."

"Oh, honey." Angelina hugged her, then turned to Trey. "You ran a stop sign, Trey?"

"There is no stop sign." Trey aimed a look of disbelief at the woman, then his future sister-in-law, before he motioned left. "As you can see—" He stopped and stared hard, real

hard, when he saw the universal octagon shape. "No." He crossed the road as the medics pulled out a gurney. "This wasn't here ten minutes ago. I swear it wasn't!" He moved down the road, turned, then sighed.

Angelina shook her head. "I come this way all the time and I never noticed how the new growth covered that much of the sign. Probably because I know it's there."

"It never used to be." Trey shifted his attention from the sign to her, then to Lucy. "I never saw it, and when I used to live here, there was no stop sign on Buell Road."

"They changed it up when they put in the Chelan Crossing subdivision a bunch of years back," the second medic explained as he walked across the road and stuck out his hand. "Brian Mulcahy, I was in school with Colt." He peered closely, checking Trey out while his partner did the same with the van driver. "You okay? Did you get hurt? Shaken up?"

"No. I'm fine. She took the brunt of it." Trey nodded to where the woman named Lucy stood near the ambulance. "I cruised right on through and didn't even notice her coming until we were both in the intersection."

"I'm calling Harv Bedlow to get over here with a chain-saw and clippers and clean this up." Brian indicated the full summer foliage. "I don't know how we missed this, Trey. The growth here impedes the visual of the sign on this side of the road and the oncoming traffic on that side."

Brian was cutting him slack. He didn't deserve it, but for one reason or another, the good people of Gray's Glen had always cut him a leniency they denied to the rest of the family. He wasn't born to be one of Sam Stafford's boys, and that earned him extra points in a community that had borne the brunt of his father's heavy-handedness for too many years. Sometimes it felt good to be favored. Other times? Not so



much, and his older brothers never hesitated to keep him from getting a big head.

"I'm fine, Brian, go check her out. Please," he added, swiping at a persistent deerfly that seemed suddenly attracted to his left ear. "And we need a tow truck to haul the van out of the water."

"We have to have a tow truck?" Two blue eyes pinned him, the kind of blue that made the summer sky pale by comparison and a Central Washington summer sky was a mighty pretty thing. She took a step forward, clearly worried. "Can't we just tip it up and drag it out?"

Trey opened his mouth to say something, then stopped.

Money. The wrecked, scarred van, the mess of plants, the tow truck . . . Lack of money put that fear in her eyes. Not him. Well, not *just* him, so that was good. "This is my bad," he told her as he crossed the quiet road once more. "I'll make restitution on everything. And I'm sorry, real sorry." He scrubbed a hand to the back of his neck and shot a quick glance to the stop sign. "I missed it completely."

So Trey Stafford was sorry.

Big deal.

Staffords had a lot to be sorry for in Gray's Glen, and even more when it came to the little farm she owned in the shadow of their wealthy land-baron-type holdings, so Lucy Carlton could just add her total ruination to the lengthy list. The thought of two months' work washed away by five seconds of inattention . . . And he'd walked away unscathed, his big, shiny SUV sparkling in the summer sun, the wide-wall tires thick and new. Typical Stafford good fortune.

Her van.

She stared at the narrow strip of blue peeking above the embankment, then gave herself a firm shake. Two seconds later and her van might have hit the bridge abutment instead of the hill, and her outcome could have been much worse. She wasn't injured, and her three kids still had a mother. Reason enough to thank God right there.

But the square-jawed handsome Stafford in front of her was another matter entirely. She faced him coolly, at least as cool as she could be with her skirt dripping midsummer creek water along the road's narrow shoulder. "I need your insurance information."

He shook his head, and when she opened her mouth to protest, his words made her pause. "I'll take care of it personally."

Lucy had learned the hard way not to be anyone's fool. She'd trusted too young and too soon. Now she meted trust out in minute doses, and this guy wasn't about to get even that much leverage. She lifted her chin and refused his offer. "That's not an option. There's protocol involved with things like this. We report the accident."

Angelina raised her hand from where she was filling out the report. "Got that covered."

"And then we exchange insurance information, except that you don't need mine because this was all your fault."

He knew that but still had the nerve to challenge her. "I didn't see the sign, true. But how fast were you going, ma'am? Because you barreled through this intersection in a way that would have taken notice at Talladega. We might have to warn Danica she's got some tried-and-true competition headed her way."

The validity of his question made her scowl. "I had the right-of-way."

He nodded, cowboy style, nice and easy, as if they were comfortable old friends, chatting on the roadside. They weren't, and she'd be darned if she was going to let one more self-absorbed Stafford monkey up her life. This guy's father had managed to do that for years. No more. She folded her arms, stubborn.

He held his ground and didn't look perturbed or particularly guilty. He looked plain good, and she was mad at herself for even realizing that. "You were in a hurry."

"Lucy, were you speeding?" Angelina asked the question gently. She pointed west of the intersection. "There are no skid marks indicating you tried to stop."

"I didn't have a reason to stop until he shot out in front of me," she protested. "How can this possibly be my fault?" She stared at Angelina—her neighbor and only real friend—then turned her attention back to the water-logged van. "I was heading to market and I got a late start."

Angelina looked at her, then the van. "Oh, no. Lucy, was the van full of your flowers?"

She would not cry. Not again. Not in front of a rich, stuck-on-himself Stafford. "Yes."

"Oh, honey." Angelina hugged her, and while the hug felt good, Lucy couldn't afford to get bogged down in sentiment. She'd be bogged down enough in the reality of no money, no van, and the massive cleanup in the back of her vehicle.

The tow truck rumbled up the road. Sal Smith from Sal's Auto climbed out, saw the van, and whistled lightly. "It's been one of those mornings already, and I could've gone for an easy tow, but there ain't a thing easy about pulling that van out of that water. You okay, Luce?"

"As well as can be expected."

Sympathy marked the auto mechanic's face. Then he spotted Trey standing with Brian. "That you, Trey?" He strode forward, stuck out his hand, and gave Sam Stafford's youngest son the biggest smile Lucy had ever seen. "You're here? That's a wonderful thing. I can't wait to tell Gracie. You doin' a concert hereabouts? Or are you here because your dad's ailing?"

"My dad."

"You're a good man, Trey." The older man clapped him on the shoulder, and Lucy expected to see the youngest Stafford soak up the kind words like a sponge on water.

He didn't. A flash of something—indecision? No, maybe doubt? Yes, that was it—made his hazel eyes wince slightly. "Can you handle this, Sal? I'll help. I'm wet already. No sense having you go down in the water to hook the rig."

"You're wet, sure enough, and if you managed to help Lucy get out of that thing, you did good, Trey. That's a bear of an angle, all straight up and perpendicular-like."

A small SUV pulled up, off the road, a blue flasher marking the volunteer firefighter status. A man climbed out with a small chainsaw, powered it up, and started clearing the brush and branches around the stop sign.

Sal got in his truck, backed it up the hill on a sharp angle, then he and his coworker climbed back out. "Did you mean that about getting wet?" he asked Trey, and Lucy was surprised when Trey nodded.

"I'm in too." Brian moved up the small embankment. "I've got a change of clothes at the firehouse. If we can winch and jerk it upright, then you can pull it up out of there, can't you, Sal?"

"That's the plan, but I don't want one of you hero-types to end up under the thing if she falls."

"Trey, you wanna rethink this?" Brian surveyed the tipped van. "We can call reinforcements."

"No need." He pulled off his outer shirt and tossed it to Angelina, leaving just a plain white cotton knit tee in place. "Let's hook her up." He climbed over the embankment, then into the water. He and Brian followed Sal's instructions and hooked the van. They each fell once, and when they climbed up the slippery slope of the inner bank, they laughed and high-fived one another.

Lucy didn't see a thing to laugh about. This wasn't high school hijinks on a crazy Saturday night. This was her bread and butter. Her paycheck for the month. Her—

She swallowed hard when Angelina slipped an arm around her shoulders. Anger and frustration laid claim to her. Sal fired up the winch, and the whining sound grabbed hold of her just like the hooked assembly clutched her rusty, dented, untrustworthy van. The van jerked, shimmied, then jerked again.

Something broke free and the hook rebounded, then bounced, barely missing Brian and Trey as it ricocheted.

"Rusted out." Brian headed back into the water. So did Trey. They reexamined the area, then Trey went down, under the water, and popped back up, soaking wet. "I've got it. Give me the hook."

Brian handed it over, and when Trey came back up, he gave Sal a thumbs-up. "I think we're good this time."

"All right." Sal started the winch again, and this time the cable held when the van lurched free from the creek bed.

Slow and steady, the truck-mounted motor drew the van out of the water, then up the bank. A stream of muddy water poured out the open doors, along with mangled plants and flowers. And when they had the van up the embankment, at

least a thousand dollars of Lucy's hard work and investment floated downstream in a surprisingly pretty burst of color, almost like it was meant to be. But it wasn't meant to be and her heart pinched tight to see it.

*Gone.*

Washed away, much like the hopes and dreams she'd had years ago.

The enormity of it all made her want to sit down and hold her head in her hands.

She wouldn't give Trey Stafford the satisfaction, so she stayed focused on business. "I think we're back to insurance information now."

"You live nearby?"

The question irked her because she owned the small farm adjacent to his father's mega-ranch, but then she got a better grip on rampant emotion. The singing Stafford brother hadn't been back for any length of time over the past several years. "Next door to the Double S."

"Let me go get cleaned up, and I'll come right by," he told her. He indicated his soaking wet clothes. "I'm kind of a mess."

He was.

But he was also a raging hot, wet-T-shirt-wearing mess, with one of the kindest smiles she'd ever seen. She'd learned to mistrust smiles, and most everything else, once she married Chase Carlton. "If you give me your info, we can call this matter done. I think that's best."

"Naw."

She wasn't too sure how he could make this decision unilaterally, and yet, he did. "I've always thought if a man makes a mistake, he needs to fix it, best he's able. I'll be at

your place within the hour. Ange?" He turned toward her friend. "See you at the ranch."

"I'm done at three, and Mami's running the kitchen."

"And the men, most likely."

Angelina acknowledged that with a smile. "Part of the job."

"That it is. Miss Lucy?" He turned her way. "Can I give you a lift back to your place?"

She'd rather crunch cold snails in her salad than ride with him. She might not know him personally, but she knew Staffords, and musicians, which gave him two strikes. In her experience, Staffords looked out for their own and had done so for decades.

And this one, the country music sensation whose magazine coverage had women of all ages sighing in the checkout lanes? If the tabloids were to be trusted, Trey Walker Stafford liked life on the wild side, and Lucy Carlton had done the wild side once.

With her hand laid flat atop the Good Book, she'd sworn never to do it again.

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