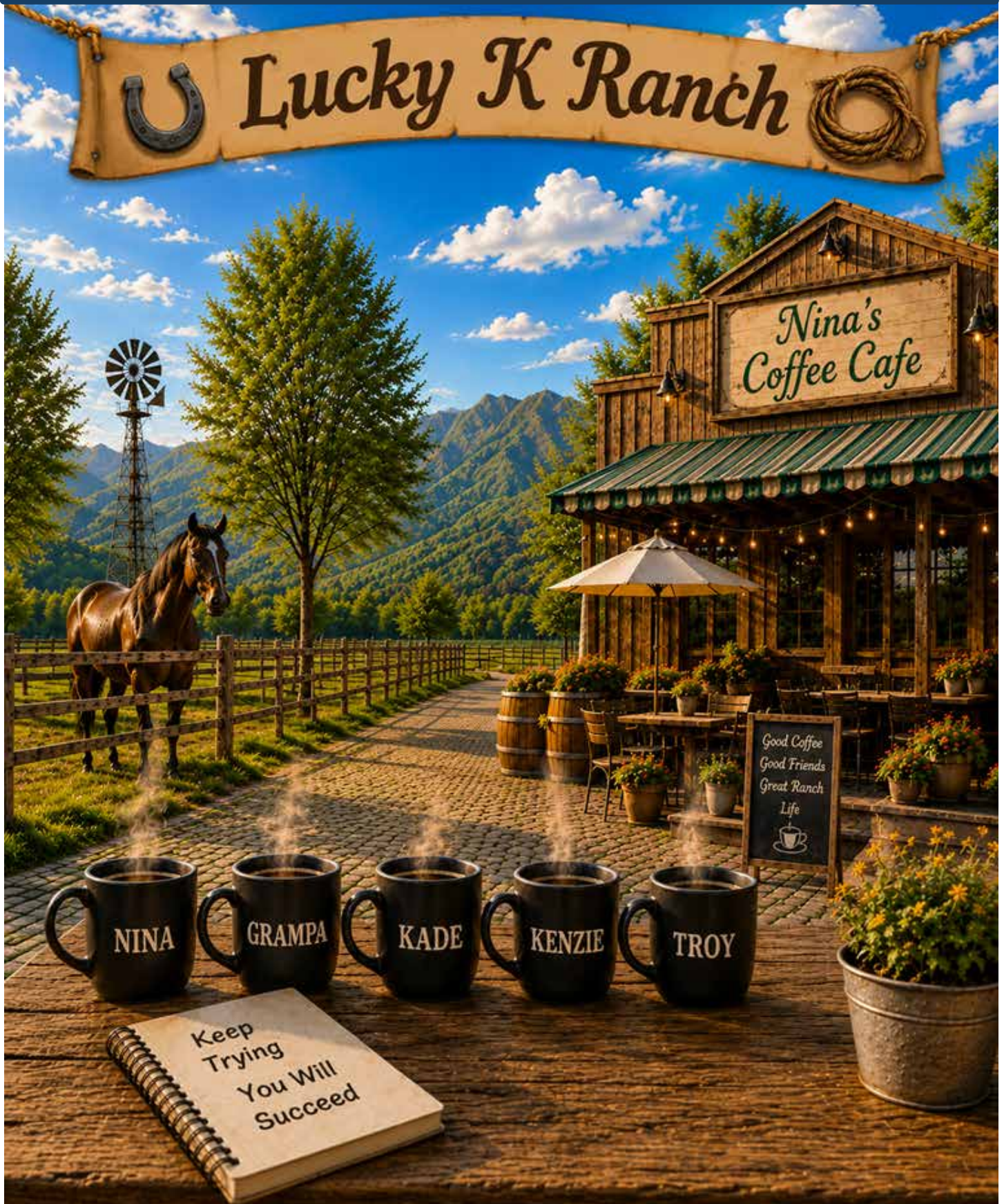


The Mower



Cowboy Kade and the Missing Lawn Mower

Once upon a time, Cousin Sam came to visit the Lucky K Ranch to help with chores. He was an early riser, a hard worker, a good baseball player and occasionally forgot that other people could not read his mind.



Early one Saturday morning, Kade came running around the corner of the ranch house.

Mom Nina and Grampa Don were sitting on the porch having their morning coffee.

Rusty slept on the porch steps with his new friend.

"Mom, have you seen Sam?" Kade asked. "His bed is made and he's already gone." Mom Nina shook her head. "Not since last night."

Grampa took another sip of coffee. "Sam usually gets up with the sun, but no one really knows what he does after that other than play baseball."



Just then, Troy and Kenzie rode up on horses to the front porch.

"Come on," Troy called. "We need to get the lawn mower and start on the back area before it gets too hot."

Kade and Rusty jogged along next to the horses heading over to the equipment shed.

Rusty looked back but his piggy friend, Miss Oinky, kept sleeping.

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When they reached the shed, Troy stopped so suddenly Kenzie nearly walked into him.

The big shed door stood wide open. The space where the riding lawn mower was usually parked was empty.

Troy stared at it.

Rusty Barked.

Troy yelled, "Where's the mower?"

Kade looked behind a stack of feed bags. Kenzie checked the other side of the shed. Troy looked inside the shed a second time. Rusty kept barking into the empty shed.



Rusty noticed everyone wandering around, looking worried. Clearly, his investigative services were required. He lowered his nose and began sniffing the ground.

Kade noticed Rusty found something. He yelled to Troy and Kenzie, "Come over here to this other shed door, Rusty found something."

Kenzie crouched beside them. "These aren't from the mower."

Troy looked closer. "Pickup-truck tires."

Kade spotted several pieces of dried grass and dirt near the tracks. Two narrow marks also led from the shed toward where the truck had been parked.

Kenzie studied them. "It looks like somebody drove the mower out here and loaded it into a pickup."

Everyone became quiet. Rusty sniffed out several places that nobody had asked him to check. Still no mower.

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They went back to the ranch house to discuss what happened.

"Mom," Kade asked, "did you move the lawn mower?"

Mom Nina looked up from the bowl she was mixing and laughed. "Kade, I don't move lawn mowers before lunch, if then."

That seemed like a reasonable answer.

Kenzie asked Grampa. "Did you take the mower somewhere?"

Grampa smiled and continued drinking his coffee, but answered, "No, this is another ranch mystery." "



Kenzie went back to the shed with Troy.

Looking at her note pad she went over the steps they had taken.

Troy looked down and smiled saying, "Well, you woke up. Who invited you, Miss Oinky, to do this investigation and why did Mom name you Miss Oinky."

Miss Oinky answered, "Oink, Oink, Oink."

Kenzie said, "Troy, I've listed what we know including that I think Miss Oinky has a crush on you."

Troy laughed and said, "It figures!"

Kenzie continued, "The mower was in the equipment shed yesterday." "The mower is gone today." "There are pickup tracks outside the shed," "And it looks like somebody loaded the mower into the truck,"

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Grampa Don and Mom Nina were sitting on the porch.

Grampa Don was calmly whittling a small horse out of a piece of wood.

Mom Nina was reading a book. Kade hurried up the steps.

“Grampa, somebody stole the mower!” Grampa stopped whittling.

Grampa said “Here are a few things to think about: Did you see somebody steal it?” Did anybody see a strange truck? “Did you find anything showing that a stranger was here?”

Kade thought about it and answered. “No.” Grampa returned to his little wooden horse but said, “Start from what you know.”



Finally, everyone gathered outside the shed while Mom Nina decided to bake a cake back at the ranch house.

They were deciding what to do next when Rusty suddenly went alert and barked looking toward the road.

A pickup was driving up the road toward the barn.

Kade stared. “That’s Sam’s truck. I wonder where he has been all this time.”

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Sam drove his truck in front of the shed and stepped out. He was wearing his baseball uniform and baseball cap.

They could see his uniform was covered with dirt because Sam believed sliding into a base was necessary even when it absolutely wasn't. Sam liked baseball. Sam also liked dirt.

But nobody was looking at Sam. They were staring at the back of his pickup truck.

Kenzie's eyes widened. She leaned forward, staring at the truck bed like she couldn't believe it.

Sam smiled and tipped his hat hello, "Good news! They fixed the mower. Nobody said anything. Sam looked around. "What's wrong?"

Kade finally found his voice. "YOU TOOK THE MOWER?"

Sam looked completely confused. "Yeah. It needed fixing."



Kenzie folded her arms, looking at Sam and the mower in his truck. "Sam, did you happen to tell anybody you were taking it?"

Sam started to answer. Then stopped. He scratched his head. Everyone waited, and Kenzie kept her eyes on Sam.

Troy stared at Sam. "We spent half the day looking for it."

"Gosh. "I guess I forgot that part. I took it into town first thing this morning," Sam explained. "Mr. Wilson at the repair shop said he'd have it ready before my baseball game finished and I picked it up afterward."

Kade stood with his hands in his pockets, "We thought somebody stole it!"

Sam looked genuinely surprised. "Who would steal a broken lawn mower?"

Nobody had an answer for that.

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Grampa Don put his hand on Sam's shoulder. "Sam?"

Sam stood a little straighter. "Yes, sir?"

Grampa looked at Sam. Then at the mower.

For a moment, it looked as though Grampa was about to give one of his famous speeches.

Then he smiled instead. "Nah. Forget it. Thanks for getting the mower fixed."

Sam grinned. "You're welcome!"

Grampa added, "And Sam? Next time, tell somebody." Sam nodded. "Yes, sir."



Rusty ran around the pickup, barking excitedly at the mower as if he just found it and was alerting everyone to where the mower was.

They all laughed as Kade bent down and said, "Rusty thinks he solved the mystery. Good boy Rusty, you found it!"

They walked back to the ranch house.



Mom Nina was standing on the ranch house porch waving.

In her other hand she held a chocolate cake. She knew that would get them all walking faster.

Standing next to her looking up was the little pig, Miss Oinky.

Mom Nina looked at Miss Oinky, "This is not for you but look who is walking toward the house. Look Miss Oinky it's Troy!" Miss Oinky took off at a fast Miss Oinky run.

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As they all walked to the ranch house the little pig, Miss Oinky, ran up to Troy and started to follow him.

They started laughing.

Troy said, "NO! I have no idea why Miss Oinky has decided I'm her favorite. I do NOT feed her any goodies. Maybe I'll teach her to fetch or something useful."

Miss Oinky answered, "Oink!"



Sam finally pulled up in his truck to wave goodbye.

Mom Nina ran out, "WAIT, here's a slice of chocolate cake and don't worry about the mower. It's fixed, back in the shed and it all worked out. Now go wash up, you have dirt all over you and bring back that uniform so I can wash it."



As the day closed on the Lucky K Ranch they all sat on the porch discussing and laughing how Sam started a mystery.

Kade said to Troy, "Troy, Miss Oinky fell asleep."

Troy answered, "I'm trying not to notice that she snuck under my arm to fall asleep, but I'll let her sleep."

And another day closed happily on the ranch