

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

**The Cowboy
Way**

CHRISTINE WENGER

Christine Wenger

The Cowboy Way

«HarperCollins»

Wenger C.

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A RODEO ROMANCE! Young widow Beth Conroy had long ago vowed never to lose her heart again. She spent all her time caring for her son, who had been in a wheelchair since the accident that killed his father. Then Kevin won a trip to the ranch of his bull-riding hero, and soon Beth's world was turned upside down by the sexy rodeo star! Jake Dixon had never met a mother as overprotective—or as beautiful. Beth's devotion to her son troubled his heart, as did the sadness in her eyes. All he wanted to do was kiss her troubles away, but when Beth learned that Jake was running from his own demons, she put her attraction on hold. Could the handsome cowboy heal Beth's wounded heart and make them a family?

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Beth touched her lips. Had Jake really kissed her?

The butterflies still in her stomach told her he had. Passionately. Hard. But she reminded herself that nothing more could come of it.

They were from two different worlds. And besides, she didn't want to get involved with anyone, especially not Jake Dixon. He was the type of man she could easily lose her heart to. And she didn't want a man in her life. Not now.

She was happy living with her son, just the two of them. And Jake Dixon drank. She remembered seeing him drinking a beer last night. No way was she going to let another man like that into her life.

No way on earth.

Then why had she accepted his invitation to go out tonight?

Dear Reader,

Well, we hope your New Year's resolutions included reading some fabulous new books—because we can provide the reading material! We begin with *Stranded with the Groom* by Christine Rimmer, part of our new **MONTANA MAVERICKS: GOLD RUSH GROOMS** miniseries. When a staged wedding reenactment turns into the real thing, can the actual honeymoon be far behind? Tune in next month for the next installment in this exciting new continuity.

Victoria Pade concludes her **NORTHBRIDGE NUPTIALS** miniseries with *Having the Bachelor's Baby*, in which a woman trying to push aside memories of her one night of passion with the town's former bad boy finds herself left with one little reminder of that encounter—she's pregnant with his child. Judy Duarte begins her new miniseries, **BAYSIDE BACHELORS**, with *Hailey's Hero*, featuring a cautious woman who finds herself losing her heart to a rugged rebel who might break it.... **THE HATHAWAYS OF MORGAN CREEK** by Patricia Kay continues with *His Best Friend*, in which a woman is torn between two men—the one she really wants, and the one to whom he owes his life. Mary J. Forbes's sophomore Special Edition is *A Father, Again*, featuring a grown-up reunion between a single mother and her teenaged crush. And a disabled child, an exhausted mother and a down-but-not-out rodeo hero all come together in a big way, in Christine Wenger's debut novel, *The Cowboy Way*.

So enjoy, and come back next month for six compelling new novels, from *Silhouette Special Edition*.

Happy New Year!

Gail Chasan

Senior Editor

Silhouette Special Edition

The Cowboy Way **Christine Wenger**



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There are so many wonderful friends I'd like to thank for making my dream come true. The Packeteers have been with me from the beginning, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart. The Sisters of the Lake were there when I needed a boost. Throughout the years, Pat Kay, Carla Neggers and Maggie Shayne gave graciously of their time and knowledge and made me a better writer. And to Amber Schalk who taught me never to give up. I think of you often, Amberoni. This one's for you, ladies—fabulous writers and fabulous friends. I love you all!

CHRISTINE WENGER

has worked in the criminal justice field for more years than she cares to remember. She has a dual master's degree in probation and parole studies and sociology from Fordham University, but the knowledge gained from such studies certainly has not prepared her for what she loves to do most—write romance!

A native central New Yorker, she enjoys watching professional bull riding and rodeo with her favorite cowboy, her husband, Jim.



GOLD BUCKLE RANCH
MOUNTAIN SPRINGS, WYOMING
CONGRATULATIONS TO
BETH CONROY AND KEVIN CONROY!

Dear Kevin,

We are happy to inform you that your essay—about how your mother needs a vacation and how you'd like to participate in Wheelchair Rodeo—has touched our hearts. Therefore, you are both invited to spend a free week at Gold Buckle Ranch located in beautiful Mountain Springs, Wyoming, during the second week of July.

Your mother will find that our facilities promote rest and relaxation. Troubles are soon forgotten at the Gold Buckle Ranch, as one spends sunshine-filled days walking among the wildflowers on any one of our beautiful trails.

Kevin, as you know, Wheelchair Rodeo is the idea of our son, world champion bull rider Jake Dixon. In your application, you stated that Jake has been your hero since before your accident. Therefore, you'll be happy to know that Jake will be personally helping you pick out a horse and teaching you to ride. He'll also be happy to help you mom get used to ranch living.

We guarantee that you'll both have a wonderful time at the Gold Buckle Ranch!

Very truly yours,

Dex & Emily Dixon

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Chapter One

Beth Conroy looked outside and saw her son parked in his usual spot at the end of the driveway, waiting for the mail to be delivered.

Every afternoon since Kevin had entered the Gold Buckle Ranch contest, he had wheeled himself down to the mailbox at the foot of the driveway at three-thirty sharp in the hope that a letter would come from Wyoming, informing him that he was a winner.

He had on his black cowboy hat as usual, the one she got him for Christmas, and he wore a big silver belt buckle, jeans and a long-sleeved western shirt. Not unusual for Lizard Rock, Arizona—most everyone dressed in the western style, but once in a while other kids wore shorts and a T-shirt.

Not Kevin.

Every article of clothing on him, except maybe his underwear, was from the “Jake Dixon Collection.” If something didn’t sport the name of Jake, his favorite bull rider, Kevin didn’t wear it.

Waiting, hoping, looking so alone, he craned his neck toward every car or truck that came down the street. “Today it’ll come,” he’d told her earlier, total trust shining in his eyes.

Five minutes later, when the white truck with the blue eagle on the side turned the corner, she saw him wave his fist in the air.

“All right! Cool!” he shouted.

To a ten year old, it must have seemed to take forever for Mrs. Owens, the mail carrier, to reach their mailbox. Beth stepped closer to the screen door so she could hear the conversation.

“Hi, Kevin,” Mrs. Owens said. She leafed through a handful of mail and smiled. “It’s here. Gold Buckle Ranch, Mountain Springs, Wyoming.”

“Yesss!”

Beth held her breath. It would mean so much to Kevin if he won the contest, but realistically the odds were against him. She didn’t want him hurt any more.

Mrs. Owens reached over the side of the truck and handed him the letter. He stared at it. Beth knew that because Kevin wanted it so much, it had never occurred to him that he wouldn’t win the contest.

It had never occurred to her that he would.

He smoothed out the envelope. Win or lose, he’d want to save it along with the letter and glue them into his Jake Dixon scrapbook or hang it on his bulletin board, another shrine to the popular cowboy.

“Would you like to take the rest of the mail?” asked Mrs. Owens.

“Sure.” He stuffed everything into the canvas bag that hung from the side of his wheelchair. “Thanks, Miss Owens.”

“Hope you won, Kevin.”

“I did!”

As fast as his hands could spin the wheels, he tore up the driveway and the ramp to the rental office. “Mom! It’s here!”

Beth opened the door for him and stepped back, laughing. “Slow down before you run over my toes.”

He stopped in front of her. “Guess what?”

“Something important come in the mail?”

With fumbling fingers, he pulled the envelope out of his canvas bag and held it up to her.

“I hope it’s good news, sweetie.”

He let out a puff of air, carefully opened the envelope and unfolded the letter.

When Beth heard his resounding “Yee-haw!” and watched him turn his chair in a complete circle, she knew that he’d won the Gold Buckle Ranch contest. Her heart filled with joy to see him so happy.

“Mom!” he yelled. “This is so cool!”

“We won the lottery?”

“Better than that.”

“What could be better?” She knew the answer to her own question. Seeing her son walk again would be better than all the money in the world.

“Going to the Gold Buckle Ranch in Wyoming and being in Wheelchair Rodeo.” With a big grin, he handed her the letter. “I won the contest, Mom. I mean, you won. We both won!”

Beth skimmed the letter and contemplated several problems. Sneaking a peek at her son’s bright eyes and big, wide grin, she couldn’t tell him that the plane trip from Lizard Rock, Arizona to Mountain Springs, Wyoming would wipe out her meager savings. She wasn’t entitled to a paid vacation yet, either. Any time off would be without pay. She had stacks of bills. Kevin was probably going to need another operation. There was that specialist in Boston and...and...

She took a deep breath. She knew how much going to the Gold Buckle Ranch meant to Kevin. She’d watched him sweat over his entry. She’d helped him look up words in the dictionary, but he wouldn’t let her read the entire essay.

“What exactly did you write?” she asked.

“I told them why you needed a vacation in a hundred words or less. It only took me seventy-one words, and that’s counting the small ones.”

She bit back a smile. “And why do I need a vacation?”

“Cuz, Mom...’cuz you worry about me. And Dad died. And we had to move to this crummy place. And ’cuz you have to work all the time.”

His smile faded as his forehead wrinkled with worry lines no ten year old should have. It had been a tough two years for both of them. After the accident, Kevin had undergone four operations and thousands of hours of physical therapy. It was way too much for a little boy to handle. She could barely handle it herself. She had hoped and prayed that his last operation would be a success, but Kevin showed no sign of improving. The surgeons were puzzled. She was devastated.

She had to save enough money to take him to Boston, to see the specialist, but now this...

Beth walked to his side. She crouched down and ran her fingers through his soft, shiny hair that was so much like Brad’s had been.

“Sweetie, I’m okay. We had to make some changes, like selling the house and moving here, but we’re doing all right. Aren’t we? There’s a pool...and you like your school.” She faltered. There had to be more reasons. “Aren’t we doing okay?”

Kevin’s knuckles were white as he gripped the arms of his wheelchair. “We’re doing okay, Mom. But you need a vacation.”

“And maybe you do, too, huh?”

He smiled. The spark in his eyes was back. “I’m going to be in Wheelchair Rodeo. Jake Dixon and Clint Scully and Joe Watley and tons more cowboys do Wheelchair Rodeo every year at the Gold Buckle. There’s a campout and trail rides—on horses, Mom. On horses!”

He paused for a quick breath. “And the cowboys teach us how to rope, too. I wish they were real steers, but they’re plastic steer-heads stuck in a block of hay. I’ll show you the picture. And then there’s this big, huge rodeo—a real rodeo. And the cowboys come from all over. All the cowboys I watch on TV will be there, but especially Jake Dixon. The Gold Buckle Ranch is Jake’s ranch, Mom, and I can meet him, and talk to him, and he’ll teach me to ride. And we’ll be staying for a week and...”

Beth was mentally adding up expenses, but she let him ramble on. She loved it when he was happy and excited and acting like a ten year old again. She’d heard nothing but “Jake Dixon this” and

“Jake Dixon that” since Kevin was six and had first shaken Jake’s hand at the Fiesta de los Vaqueros, Tucson’s annual rodeo.

Jake had won the bull riding competition that night and had stayed in the arena to sign autographs. Beth had waited in line with Kevin for over an hour, and Jake had autographed Kevin’s program and given him a red bandana. Then Jake had taken the time to talk to him, making the little boy feel special. Ever since, Kevin had thought of Jake as his special hero, a larger-than-life figure who did much cooler things than any baseball or football star.

Jake Dixon had paid him more attention in those five minutes than Kevin’s own father had in a week.

After that, the rodeo became an annual event and Kevin got three more autographed programs, had three more conversations with Jake and got three more bandanas.

Then the accident happened, and it seemed that whenever the Tucson Rodeo was scheduled, so was another operation.

During one of his hospital stays, Kevin had seen Jake being interviewed on TV. On a whim, Beth had e-mailed Jake’s fan club, explained the situation and asked if they’d send an autographed picture of Jake to Kevin at the hospital. They did just that. They also sent him a western shirt, the one he had on today.

“Be tough, Kevin. Cowboy up!” Jake had written with a black felt pen. Kevin had insisted on framing it, and Beth had found the perfect frame in the hospital’s gift shop—silver with bulls on each corner.

With that picture and autograph, Jake Dixon did more to help Kevin heal than all the doctors could. Again this stranger had come through when her son needed a hero the most.

If somehow she could arrange a week off, she could only pray that Jake would live up to her son’s expectations. She herself had no expectations as far as men were concerned, but if Jake proved undeserving of Kevin’s adoration, he’d answer to her.

She ruffled Kevin’s hair and stood. She had made her decision. “Well, I guess we’d better go to the Gold Buckle Ranch and meet Jake Dixon.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

She reached out to hug him, and for a second, she thought he was going to stand. Tears stung her eyes as she gathered him close to her. If she had to, she would sell her soul to get the time off to give Kevin this trip to Wyoming.

“Thanks for winning the trip for us, sweetie,” she said, hoping she sounded convincing. “We’re going to have a great time.”

Checking the clock on the wall, she saw that it was almost time for Kevin’s water therapy. She had two rent checks to collect and a phone call to make before she could close the office for the day and watch the therapist work with Kevin.

“You’d best get your bathing suit on. Sam will be here in a half hour for your exercises. I’ll be in to help you change.”

“I can do it.”

“But—”

He was off in a flash of chrome and denim, wheeling up the ramp that led to their small apartment in the back of the office.

She felt a pang of sadness when she remembered that Kevin had called their apartment “crummy.” It was crummy compared to where they used to live—a brand-new, four-thousand-square-foot house in the Catalina Mountains crowning Tucson. There they’d had wide-open spaces and room to run. It was a perfect spot for a kid growing up.

In contrast, their apartment complex was crowded with cars, concrete and cul-de-sacs.

Their life had been fairly good before the accident. Before her husband Brad had picked up eight-year-old Kevin from his friend's house and crashed into the concrete pilings of a bridge.

That was two years ago, yet she always felt physically sick whenever she thought of that day, that minute, that second that had forever changed her life and Kevin's. She would live with the guilt forever.

She should have known that Brad had started drinking again. She should have known....

She had been driving home from the grocery store that day when she saw Brad's cherry-red convertible crushed against a wall of concrete. She'd jumped out of her car and run as fast as she could toward the accident, but the police had caught her and pulled her away. Helpless, she'd watched and waited, crying hysterically, as police and firemen pried the mangled metal of the car away from Kevin to get him out.

She was screaming his name so loudly that Kevin heard her. He lifted his hand and waved. She knew then in her mother's heart that he was going to live. They'd let her hold his hand until they sedated him and got him ready for the ambulance.

As Kevin dozed, a kind policeman took her over to see Brad. He was already dead, lying in a ditch along the side of the road. A bright blue plastic sheet covered his body.

She knelt down, lifted the sheet and saw her husband, finally at peace.

Alcohol had claimed Brad, but it wouldn't take her little boy, not while she had a breath left in her. She'd kissed Brad's forehead for the man he used to be, taking one last look and remembering happier times. She'd let her tears fall, and when they dropped onto his face, she brushed them off and then covered him.

"Your husband didn't have his seat belt on, but your boy did. That saved him," said the cop.

She got into the ambulance with Kevin, and didn't let go of his hand until they wheeled him into the operating room.

Beth shook away the memory and blinked back her tears. Relaxing her clenched fists, she poured herself a drink of water from the cooler and drank it down. She had to concentrate on business right now, so she would be able to watch Kevin's progress with Sam. Then she'd make dinner, read the information from the Gold Buckle Ranch, and enjoy her son's company for the rest of the evening.

Kevin was her whole life, and to make things up to him, she would give him the world if she could. But since she couldn't, the least she could do was give him Jake Dixon.

Jake signed a dozen autographs in front of the baggage claim area at the little airport outside Mountain Springs. When he was on top of the Professional Bull Riders point standings, hundreds of people used to crowd around him. He'd loved every minute of it.

A dozen fans would have to do, since these days he was ranked number thirty-nine out of forty-five pro bull riders. He was just hanging on to the tour by his ragged fingernails.

Jake checked his watch for the hundredth time. Instead of being cooped up in the dinky little airport, he would rather be mending fences or working with the new mustang he'd just bought from Joe Watley, a stock contractor.

Better yet, he'd rather be riding bulls on the Professional Bull Riders tour and working on pumping up his ranking.

But nothing was scheduled for the month of July on the tour, so he'd take care of business at the ranch and work on organizing the Jake Dixon Gold Buckle Bull Riders Challenge and Wheelchair Rodeo like he'd done for the past two years.

From what he could tell so far, they were going to have a bigger crowd than ever for the Gold Buckle Challenge. Area hotels were booked solid and so were area campgrounds. This meant a nice boost to the local economy and an even bigger boost for the Gold Buckle Ranch.

He really loved organizing and running Wheelchair Rodeo for the kids. At least he was doing something that made him feel needed instead of angry and frustrated, the way he usually did these days.

He walked the short distance to the one waiting room, his back and right leg screaming for mercy. He checked the clock and sat down on a yellow plastic chair that was welded to three other yellow plastic chairs. Stretching his legs in front of him, he waited. Fifteen minutes later, people began filing into the waiting room.

He watched and waited, but others picked up all the passengers. Soon he was alone.

Shifting in his chair, he pulled the piece of paper his mother had given him from the back pocket of his jeans and checked it against the sign to the left of the door. Flight 1843. This was the correct gate.

Jake looked around for someone to ask about Beth and Kevin Conroy and when they might be arriving.

“Mom, it’s him! It’s Jake Dixon! He’s really here! He’s here!”

Jake couldn’t help but grin as he found the source of the noise—a cute-as-hell, freckle-faced boy in a wheelchair.

The beautiful blonde who pushed the boy stifled a yawn. It must have been a long flight.

The boy wiggled in his wheelchair and waved his hands in the air. “Jake! Jake! Remember me, Kevin Conroy? And this is my mom.”

Jake tipped his hat to her. Immediately he was drawn to her eyes. They were as green as the new grass that sprouted along the Silver River in the springtime.

“Wyoming will never be the same, now that your biggest fan has landed, Mr. Dixon.” She held out her hand. “I’m Beth Conroy. As you now know, this is Kevin. You’ve met him at the Tucson Rodeo a couple of times.”

He shook her hand, glad for the heads-up. He’d met so many kids over the years, he couldn’t remember them all.

“Sure. Howdy, Kevin. Good to see you again.” He hunkered down and shook Kevin’s hand. The boy had a nice strong grip, and his eyes were round with excitement.

What a darn shame that he was in a wheelchair. What a darn shame that any child in this world had to be disabled, handicapped, impaired—whatever the latest politically correct term was. It always twisted his gut. That was one of the reasons he’d started Wheelchair Rodeo—to give kids like Kevin the chance to be like other kids.

“Are you ready for Wheelchair Rodeo, Kevin?” Jake asked.

“Yes. I can’t wait. It’s going to be awesome!”

“We have a great time every year.”

The boy had a death grip on Jake’s hand and was still pumping away.

“Is Clint Scully going to be at the Gold Buckle?” Kevin asked.

“Sure. I’m expecting Clint anytime now. Joe Watley arrived a couple of days ago. Cody’s here. Wayne and Trace are here. Ramon is arriving later in the week. More are coming in every day.”

The boy was ready to rocket out of the chair at that news. “Oh, wow! Oh, cool! This is awesome!”

“Kevin, Mr. Dixon is going to be needing his hand back,” his mother said, her green eyes twinkling.

Jake laughed and stood up slowly, his knees and back grinding painfully. Every bone in his thirty-two-year-old frame ached like a sore tooth. He had one month to heal from his latest round of injuries and start his comeback. The next three months of the tour would be crucial. Just one more World Finals in Vegas...

“It’s fine with me if he calls me Jake, and you, too, ma’am. We’re not formal here.”

Kevin finally released his hand. “What’s wrong, Jake? You in pain? It was Scooter who stomped on your legs, right?”

“Scooter got me pretty good in Oklahoma City, but I think the worst came from Prickly Pear way back at the Billings event. White Whale made it worse in Loughlin. But I’ll be okay.”

“Just another day at the office. Right?”

He choked back a laugh. “Right, Kevin.”

Jake felt uncomfortable talking about himself. Besides he had no business talking about his minor injuries when the boy was in a wheelchair.

He hadn’t read all the files yet, so he didn’t know Kevin’s history. His folks were sticklers about keeping a file on each kid enrolled in the Wheelchair Rodeo program. Everyone who worked with the kids was expected to read each one. Then they’d be turned over to his pal, Dr. Mike Trotter, the resident physician for the week, for his review.

“Shall we head over to pick up your gear?” Jake stepped around to push Kevin’s chair, and Beth was more than willing to give it up.

She smiled up at him. “Thank you.”

“You look tired,” Jake said, heading for the baggage claim area.

“It was a long flight.”

“Arizona’s pretty far away. Pretty country, though. Their rodeo is the best, but I’ve been there a couple other times too.”

“Really, Jake?”

Beth gave Kevin a nudge on the shoulder. “See? Arizona’s not so boring. Jake Dixon likes it.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said.

Pieces of luggage were starting their trip on the rubber conveyer belt, and people rushed to claim a spot along its path. There was no room for a wheelchair and two more people.

“We’re in no rush. Right?” Jake asked.

“Not at all. We’re on vacation,” Beth said with a long sigh.

It was a long way to travel, but her weariness seemed more bone deep than it should have been just from the flight. She could use some color in her cheeks and some sweet Wyoming air, and maybe some good old-fashioned rocking on the front porch of her cabin.

“Well, if it ain’t Jake Dixon.”

Jake spun around in the direction of the deep, booming voice. Harvey Trumble, editor of the Wyoming Journal, stood with two suitcases in hand and the usual grimace on his face.

Everyone within earshot turned to stare, including Beth and Kevin.

Just his luck. “Go catch your plane, Harvey. Now’s not a good time.”

Harvey dropped his suitcases and clenched his fists.

Shoot. Jake didn’t want to fight the man. Not with the kid so close, watching his every move and looking at him as if he were some kind of hero. Besides, Harvey had a good fifty pounds on him, and even though Jake was younger, he couldn’t risk a new injury.

“I have things to do, Harvey. I’m not looking for a fight.”

“You gotta be drunk to fight me, Jake? Like you were when you almost killed my boy?”

Jake glanced over at the two arrivals. Kevin’s eyes were as wide as saucers. Beth stared at him as if rattlers were sprouting from his ears. She stepped in front of Jake, took the handles of Kevin’s chair and wheeled him to the far end of the luggage belt.

Jake grabbed Harvey’s arm and yanked him out the front door of the airport, away from most of the crowd.

“Like I told you before, Harvey, Keith had his hands all over a young lady, who told him to stop no less than three times.”

Jake had to calm down before he punched him. If he hit him, Harvey would see to it that it was front-page news. Just like the article he wrote about how Jake’s sponsors were dropping him faster than an eight-second ride.

Jake dodged his wild punch. “C’mon, Harvey. Not now.”

“You didn’t have to break my boy’s arm.”

“I didn’t. I admit that I punched Keith after he took a swing at me. But then it turned into a big free-for-all. Someone hit him on the head with a beer bottle. When he fell, he broke his arm. Keith is okay. He’s getting a lot of sympathy and still managing to paw the ladies at the Last Chance, even with one arm in a cast.”

Harvey pushed Jake out of his way.

“You’re nothing but a has-been!” Harvey yelled. “You’re a drunk, Jake Dixon, and you hurt my boy.” Not taking his eyes off Jake, he backed up to the automatic doors of the airport and went inside.

It was then that Jake noticed Beth and Kevin outside. They both stared at him. Beth’s face was ghostly white, her lips pinched. Kevin was motionless in his chair, so unlike the animated, excited boy who’d got off the plane.

“Sorry you had to hear that,” Jake said, feeling lower than the stuff he scraped off his boots. He didn’t know exactly what they’d heard, except for Harvey’s parting slam.

“Maybe we should take a taxi to the ranch.” Beth’s words faded into the air, then she stood tall and raised her chin. “I’m sorry if this offends you, Mr. Dixon, but I have to ask. Have you been drinking? Kevin and I will not be riding with anyone who has been drinking.”

“I haven’t been drinking,” Jake said softly, meeting her eyes.

“Mom, he’s Jake Dixon. Jake Dixon! He doesn’t do stuff like that.”

The adoration was back in the kid’s eyes, but Jake sure as hell didn’t feel like a hero.

“My truck’s right there.” He nodded in the direction of his black half-ton pickup. “It’s a good hour-and-a-half ride to the Gold Buckle over some pretty rough roads. The taxis won’t make the trip out there.” He still saw the disbelief in her eyes. “Ma’am, I haven’t been drinking.”

She touched Kevin’s hair protectively. “I made a mistake once before.” After a long, hard, evaluating look into Jake’s eyes, she said, “All right, Mr. Dixon. All right. I’m going to believe you—unless I find out otherwise.”

“Please call me Jake.”

“I’d rather not.”

Chapter Two

What am I doing? Beth thought as she looked out the truck window at the tall green grass. Cattle dotted the pastures, and mountains loomed in the distance just like they did around Lizard Rock, Arizona.

With one elbow stuck out the window and the other hand draped casually over the wheel, Jake drove down what seemed like an endless highway, patiently answering Kevin's infinite number of questions.

She stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. He had a strong jaw and a trace of beard that made him look a little like an outlaw. Long, strong legs were packed into tight, worn jeans, and he wore a crisp, white long-sleeved shirt with the top three buttons undone. He wore a gold buckle, almost as big as a saucer, on his belt.

He looked just like the posters and pictures that were hanging from every free space in Kevin's tiny room. Because she'd read every article about him for the past several years, she felt like she knew him, inside and out.

She had always thought he was handsome, but she hadn't been prepared for how masculine and virile he was in person. She had never realized that his blue eyes glittered like the turquoise sky above, or that his low, rich voice would make every bone in her body vibrate.

From the top of his hat to the slightly curled tip of his dusty boots, Jake Dixon looked every bit the cowboy that he was.

She remembered how he had picked Kevin up from his wheelchair and gently placed him in the front seat of his pickup—and Kevin was no lightweight by any means. She had heard him catch his breath after he straightened his back, and she had seen him grimace. He also had a noticeable limp. Bull riding was taking a heavy toll on him.

No doubt his drinking didn't help matters, either. That was something that wasn't mentioned in the magazines.

Her hands tightened into fists. She had heard all that she'd wanted to hear outside the airport. "You're a drunk, and you hurt my son."

Those same words had been running through her mind when she stood at Brad's grave and while Kevin endured one operation after another.

She wrapped an arm around her son's shoulder and pulled him closer to her. She hadn't protected him from his own father, but she would protect him from Jake Dixon.

Her heart sank as she thought about the Wheelchair Rodeo program and how it was to start in two days. The literature she had received indicated that Jake had started the program, and he saw to everything personally.

How was she going to trust him with Kevin?

"Okay, Mom?" Kevin asked, breaking through her reverie.

"Hmm? What?" she asked.

"Jake said that he'd show me around the ranch when we get there. And that I can pick out my own horse from the remuda. Hear that, Mom? The remuda. And I get to take care of my horse all week!"

"That's great," she mumbled without enthusiasm. How was she going to tell her son that she didn't want him near his hero?

"Okay, Mom?"

She needed time to think. She wanted to know more about the real Jake Dixon. She wanted to observe him. She didn't want to hand her son over to him and trust him, the way she had trusted Brad. Not with what she had just heard about him.

Jake must have seen her hesitation.

“I’ll take good care of Kevin. And you’re welcome to come along. Right, Kev?”

Her stomach clenched. No one ever called him Kev, except Brad.

“Yeah, c’mon, Mom. Come with us.”

She could never say no to Kevin when he looked at her with those big brown eyes. And she didn’t want to throw a wet blanket on his excitement. Maybe it was unfair of her to compare Jake to Brad.

“Sure. I’d love to,” she reluctantly agreed.

“Yippee!” Kevin shouted.

The two of them went back to talking about who rode what bull for a ninety-point ride, and who was on the injured list. From the look on Jake’s rugged face, Kevin’s knowledge about the sport surprised him. If only Kevin were that good in English and math.

She laid her head back on the seat of the big truck and listened to their conversation. Kevin was bubbly and happy, and Jake was adding to his excitement, so much so that it was almost contagious.

“There it is! The Gold Buckle Ranch!” Kevin shouted. “It’s a real ranch!”

A slender, pretty woman in jeans and a navy-blue sweatshirt stood waving on the front porch of a log ranch house. Beside her was a tall, handsome man in jeans and a flannel shirt. They both had warm, welcoming smiles.

“My folks,” Jake said. “Em and Dex Dixon.”

She and Kevin waved back.

Dex opened the truck door and helped her out. “Welcome to the Gold Buckle, Beth.” He bent his head to peer inside the truck. “And this young cowboy must be Kevin.”

“Yessir!” Kevin said.

Kevin scooted to the end of the seat, and Beth let out a gasp when it looked as if he might just jump down from the truck.

“Whoa, young man!” Dex said. “Hang on there.”

Jake already had Kevin’s chair and the two men were helping Kevin out when Emily gathered Beth in a hearty hug.

“It’s so nice to meet you. I feel like I know you already from Kevin’s letter,” Emily said.

Beth let herself relax and enjoy the warm greeting. There wasn’t a day that went by that she didn’t wish she had a mother who would hug her like that and who she could talk to and confide in, especially now, when she was so worried about Kevin. But Carla Tisdale Phillips O’Brien Fontelli had never been that kind of mother, and she never hugged.

“Welcome, Kevin!” Emily said as the boy beamed up at her. She bent down and gave him a hug too. “I have you in the Trail Boss Cabin. That’s the far one in those big pine trees. It has a lot of privacy. Now come into my kitchen for a bite to eat, and Jake will drop your bags inside the cabin. That okay with you, Jake?”

“Sure.”

“Then come back for a bite to eat when you’re done,” she added.

“I have to talk to Joe and check on the mustang. Then I’ll be in,” Jake replied. “After that, I promised Kevin that he could pick out his horse for the week. Then I’m going to show him and his mom around the ranch.”

He looked at Beth and tweaked his hat brim. She watched as he walked away. His limp was more prominent now. His shirt didn’t have a wrinkle on it as it stretched across broad shoulders and a muscled back.

Most of all, Jake Dixon was born to wear jeans.

“It’s a beautiful place,” Beth told Jake as she looked out at the grounds of the Gold Buckle Ranch from the porch of the Trail Boss Cabin. “So big. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The mountains seemed closer now and rocky. Those in the far distance had a cap of snow. The ranch was nestled in a valley with pine trees to the right and a field of grass that reached to the

mountains to the left. Among the pines, a dozen little log cabins were strung along a glittering creek like charms on a bracelet.

The Trail Boss Cabin, deep in the pines, was postcard perfect. It was made out of rough logs, pine probably. Lacy curtains graced the windows, in stark contrast to the rugged logs. Two rocking chairs and a hammock were on the porch, just begging to be occupied.

Hundreds of cows and a dozen horses lowered their heads to graze on a slight hill about a half mile away. Closer were several other buildings of different shapes and sizes. The biggest was the barn with a corral to the side of it. Horses grouped together under the shade of several large trees. Some looked over the fence as if they, too, were awaiting guests.

She took a deep breath. The air was pure and held the scent of pine.

The Trail Boss Cabin was just as cute inside as she had thought it would be. It had two bedrooms and a screened-in back porch overlooking the creek. Pink geranium ivy cascaded from terra-cotta pots on the steps leading down from the porch. She could hear the rushing stream behind and on the right side of the cabin. Like all of the other cabins, it had a wheelchair ramp.

Inside, a stone fireplace took over one wall of the living room, which flowed into the kitchen. The appliances were old but brilliantly clean. The inside walls were varnished, knotty pine planks, aged to a golden hue. The bedrooms and the bathroom were down a small hall.

“Hey, Mom, it’s bigger than our apartment,” Kevin yelled from one of the bedrooms.

“It seems like it is.”

“Wouldn’t you like to stay here forever?” Kevin came toward her, the wheels of his chair rolling effortlessly down the hardwood floor.

Beth sighed. It was a homey place in which to live. So calm, so quiet. It seemed like she could reach out and touch the mountains. However, she had to make a living and that living was in Lizard Rock, Arizona.

Heaven knows, she had enough bills to pay. She lived free at the apartments and received a small salary for being the rental agent and manager, but she had to be there to do her job. She was lucky that Inez, her boss, had given her this time off. Unfortunately, it was without pay, and that was going to set her budget plans back to the Stone Age.

“That’s not possible, Kevin,” she said. “I have a job back in Arizona and you have school. Remember, this is just a vacation.”

“But if we lived here, it would be like a vacation all the time,” Kevin said. “Huh, Jake?”

Jake deposited their suitcases near the kitchen table. “Running a ranch is a lot of work, Kev. Not every day is a vacation.”

Beth could have hugged him for that answer.

“But there’s not a better job in the world,” Jake added. “Other than riding bulls. And there’s no state prettier than Wyoming.”

If only he had stopped while he was ahead.

They walked back onto the porch, and Beth sat down in one of the rocking chairs. Jake stood by Kevin’s side near the railing.

Kevin pointed to a long building. “That’s the bunkhouse. Right, Jake? I wish I could stay there with the cowboys tonight—”

“The Trail Boss Cabin is perfectly fine,” Beth interrupted before Jake could even answer. She might as well nip that idea in the bud.

When Wheelchair Rodeo started in a couple of days, he’d be moving into the bunkhouse with the other boys in the program, and that was soon enough. Besides, Beth still had mixed feelings about Kevin leaving her watchful eye.

“How many cowboys work here, Mr. Dixon?” she asked, trying to be polite but secretly hoping that he’d disappear. Surely, there were other guests who needed his attention.

“That depends. The door is always open to cowboys who are healing from their injuries, or those who need a place to stay for whatever reason. Mostly, they stop by for a few days for some of my mother’s pies or Cookie’s cooking. In exchange for room and board, they help out around the place.”

“Even more come for the Gold Buckle Challenge. Right, Jake?”

“That’s right, Kev. But they come for both rodeos. They like helping out with Wheelchair Rodeo maybe even more than they like riding in the Gold Buckle Challenge. Some of them bring their families and camp out in the upper pasture. Some just crash at the bunkhouse. It’s like a reunion.”

“They wouldn’t come if it wasn’t for you, Jake,” Kevin said.

“Maybe. That’s nice of you to say, Kev. So, how about a real tour?”

“Cool! C’mon, Mom!”

Kevin flew down the ramp before she even got out of the rocker. She was just going to remind him to be careful when Jake held out his hands to help her up.

Without thinking, she put her hands into his. They were rough, callused. Hands that did physical work, ranch work, real work. Brad’s hands had always been soft and perfectly manicured—but then, Brad wasn’t a cowboy. He’d been a stockbroker.

Although she was on her feet, she held on to him for a moment longer than necessary to take her measure of the man she would have to trust. The man who would be taking care of her son.

Jake met her gaze with steady, unflinching eyes. Eyes that weren’t bloodshot like Brad’s had always been.

“Is that the barn? Oh, wow! It’s the barn, Mom!” Kevin called.

Realizing that she was holding on to Jake way too long, she dropped his hands. “Wait for us, Kevin!” she shouted back.

Jake smiled. “I’ve never seen anyone so thrilled about a barn,” he said, as they walked down a cleared path.

They stopped at the gate of the corral. Several horses walked over, most of them sniffing Kevin and Jake. Even to Beth’s untrained eye, the long-legged, satin-coated horses looked like beauties.

“They know that I usually have a treat for them.” Jake dipped a hand in the pocket of his shirt and handed Kevin a piece of a carrot. “Hold it flat on your hand and don’t be scared when their big yellow teeth come at you.”

“I’m not scared,” he said, but he had a white-knuckled grip on the arm of his wheelchair. His other hand was flat, his face a study in concentration.

“They won’t hurt you,” Jake said. “Just reach out. Keep your hand flat.”

Kevin did it, and when the horse gently took the carrot, Kevin let out a little squeal. “Cool!”

Jake turned to Beth. “How about you?”

Beth nodded, eager to try. She held out her hand and he placed a piece of carrot on it. The horses pushed closer, each nosing for the food. She picked out a horse who was more patient than the others and opened her hand.

Jake moved behind her and put his hand under hers. “Keep your hand flat.”

It was a harmless gesture, but she could feel the warmth of his chest on her back, could smell the scent of his spicy aftershave, the warm wisps of his breath on the side of her face.

When the carrots were gone, Kevin turned to Jake. “Which horse is going to be mine?”

“None of these. They’re not ready yet. But there’s a couple in the barn you might like.”

He tugged back two enormous wooden doors. The smell of horses and hay drifted around them.

Kevin gave a breathy “Oh, wow!” and wheeled into the barn.

Beth inhaled. “This reminds me of when I was a kid and I lived in central New York—my parents used to take me to the state fair.”

Jake looked at her with interest, waiting for her to continue.

“I waited all summer for the fair. I couldn’t wait to go through the horse barns and look at all the beautiful horses. I’d pick one out and pretend it was mine. Then I’d watch the horse shows and cheer my horse to victory.”

“Now I know where Kevin gets his love of horses.”

Jake smiled, and she could see tiny lines at the corners of his eyes that were white against the dark tan of his face.

She smiled back. “I’ve always liked horses.” She paused, thinking back. “When Kevin was little, several times during the day he’d hand me a book, crawl up on my lap and ask me to read to him. I read every book with a horse or a pony on the cover a hundred times over. I’d take him to horse shows and rodeos when they were nearby. He just loved going.”

The memories that the barn smells triggered washed over her, all warm and comforting. Those were some of the best times of her life, just Kevin and her, and that’s the way she liked it.

Kevin craned his neck as he wheeled down the cement walkway of the barn. He didn’t know where to look first. On both sides were stalls, and most of the horses hung their heads over the half-door. On each door was a wooden sign with the horse’s name in black print.

“That one there is a beauty,” he said. “Wow! So is that one! And that one!”

Jake was patient with Kevin. As they came to each stall, Kevin had to pet the horse and call it by name.

After a while, Beth caught Jake’s eye. “Can I speak with you, Mr. Dixon?”

Nodding, he left Kevin petting a horse and walked over toward her.

“About the horse—”

Jake held a hand up. “I promise you, Kevin’s horse will be gentle. All the horses in this barn are hand-picked for Wheelchair Rodeo. I work with them myself. Don’t worry.”

“Easy for you to say,” she said. “He’s not your son.”

“No, but I’ll take care of him as if he were.”

She met his gaze. His blue eyes were as cool and as refreshing as a spring day, and he truly seemed to care about Kevin.

So then why couldn’t she let herself trust him completely?

Because she had trusted her son to a man with a drinking problem before, and Kevin was almost killed. And the man had died.

Jake glanced down the long row of horses and shouted, “You might like Cheyenne, Kev, or the black horse in stall three. Check them out.” Then he turned back to Beth and lowered his voice. “Look, I don’t know all of what you heard at the airport, but don’t pay any attention to it.”

“I heard that you were drunk and hurt a man.”

“I wasn’t drunk. I had a few beers, yes. I had some words with someone, and then suddenly we were in the middle of a free-for-all.” Jake sighed and looked away. After several seconds, his gaze returned to her. “Look, Wheelchair Rodeo begins the day after tomorrow, so if you’re having second thoughts about trusting me with Kevin, you’d better tell me now.”

She met his direct gaze. “I’m having second thoughts.”

“Fair enough.” He nodded. “Then take him out of the program.”

“It would break his heart,” she said. “You’re his hero. He idolizes you.”

“Lady, I’m no one’s hero. It’s all I can do these days to get up every morning.” He was speaking through gritted teeth. “And I might be a lot of things, but I’m not a drunk.”

That was just what Brad had always said.

Beth swallowed hard and glanced at Kevin to make sure he was out of hearing range. She knew she had angered Jake Dixon, but she had good reasons for not trusting him—or anyone, for that matter—with her son.

Maybe she owed him an explanation. “His father was an alcoholic,” she said. “He picked Kevin up at a friend’s birthday party. Brad was drunk and he drove his car into the cement of a bridge. Brad

died and Kevin lived. After four operations in two years, Kevin's still in a wheelchair. The doctors don't understand why."

"Oh...shoot..." He took off his hat and raked his fingers through his hair, then plopped the hat back on his head. "I'm sorry," he said, watching Kevin. "But now at least I understand why you hate drinking." He paused. "He'll never get out of the chair?"

He touched her arm when she didn't answer right away. It was an unexpected, comforting gesture. The look on his face was concerned and sympathetic. She wondered yet again if she was judging him too harshly.

She took a deep breath and jumped in. "Kevin's last operation was supposed to work, but obviously it didn't." When the tears started to sting her eyes, she blinked them back. "He's idolized you since he first met you at the Tucson rodeo. He was five years old. You paid attention to him, listened to him, and you gave him a red bandana. He's never forgotten that, and one of the things that kept him going was his dream of coming to the Wheelchair Rodeo."

"I'm honored, but—"

Beth held up an index finger. "Oh, there's much more. Ever since then, he's watched bull riding constantly on TV, looking for you, cheering you on. When he was in the hospital, he fought to stay awake to watch you being interviewed on Letterman during one of his hospital stays. Your fan club sent him a special autographed picture that has never left his sight. He wears your clothes. His room is covered in pictures of Jake Dixon. He thinks you're the greatest thing since school recess."

Jake met her gaze. "I don't know what to say."

"You can promise me that you'll be the hero he thinks you are."

Jake stared down at the floor. "I can't promise that."

He shifted from foot to foot, and Beth sensed that he wanted to get as far away from her as possible.

"I'm just a cowboy. That's all. I can guarantee you that he'll have a good time at the ranch. I can teach him how to ride and rope and cook over a campfire, but if he needs a hero, he'd best look up to Jimmy Watley or Clint Scully or another cowboy."

"But it's you he idolizes."

He shook his head as if he were shaking her words out, and walked toward Kevin, his boots making dull clicking noises on the cement.

She trailed behind him. Nobody's hero? Kevin was only one little boy among thousands who worshiped the ground he walked on. He was the primary reason why Kevin worked so hard to get better. "Jake Dixon is tough, Mom. I am, too," Kevin had told her.

She owed Jake Dixon. She owed him a lot.

"Have you picked one out yet?" Jake said to Kevin. "Remember, you have to take care of the horse all week. That means brushing, feeding, watering and taking care of the tack. Got it?"

"I can do it, Jake. I promise!"

"Then who will it be, Kev?" Jake asked.

"Killer."

Beth closed the distance between them. "Killer?"

"Actually, his full name is Killer Bee, but we call him Killer for short," Jake explained.

That didn't make her feel any better. She didn't want Kevin riding on a horse named Killer, even if it was a cute black horse with soulful black eyes.

She would have called him Thunder, like another fictional horse of her childhood she'd discovered in a library book. Her Thunder was a shiny, black horse with four white socks. She read the book over and over again until she just about had it memorized.

She looked over the stall door to see if Killer Bee had white socks. He didn't, but he was still a beautiful horse.

Kevin fidgeted in his chair. “Will you take him out of the stall, Jake? I want to look at him all over.”

“Okay, Kev.”

With Kevin on the edge of his seat, Jake led Killer Bee out of his stall.

The horse sniffed at Kevin’s shirt as the boy giggled and reached out to pet him. “Just think,” said Kevin, “he’s mine for a week.”

Jake raised an eyebrow, met Beth’s eyes and waited for her reply.

She took a deep breath and prayed that she wouldn’t regret her decision. Kevin’s doctor felt that the horseback riding would be good for him, would strengthen his muscles. That would be wonderful for his broken body, but she knew that the Gold Buckle Ranch experience would do even more for Kevin’s morale.

“Yes, Kevin. He’s yours while we are here. Make sure you listen to Mr. Dixon—Jake—and learn how to take care of him.”

Jake gave a slight nod, obviously pleased with her decision. “Well, buckaroo, I’d best get you and your mom back to the Trail Boss Cabin so you both can get some rest.”

He put Killer back into his stall. “If I have time tomorrow, we can get a riding lesson in and maybe even a roping lesson. You can get a jump on the rest of the kids.”

“Cool. I brought my official Jake Dixon rope with me.”

Jake shrugged. “Huh?”

“I bought it from your official Web site for Kevin’s ninth birthday,” Beth explained.

“Oh. I forgot about that. My fan club runs the Web site,” he mumbled, then said to Kevin, “I’m sure it’s a good rope if you bought it from my official Web site.” He grinned.

“Well, it’s time we went to bed, cowboy,” Beth said. “It’s been a long day.”

Jake did a double-take, raised an eyebrow and pushed back his hat with a thumb. His eyes twinkled in amusement.

“Kevin,” she clarified, grinning in spite of herself. It was hard not to like Jake. “It’s time for bed, Kevin.”

Chapter Three

Beth woke to the scent of pine. A breeze lightly tossed the lace curtains. Sunlight flickered on her face, and she smiled. What a nice way to wake up. But why wake up yet? She turned over, scrunched the pillow to the perfect shape under her head and closed her eyes again.

“That’s awesome, Jake.”

Jake. That name again. She had dreamed of the tall, lean cowboy with the lazy grin and the sexy blue eyes all night. Now she woke up to his name drifting on the breeze.

She even remembered saying the same phrase— “That’s awesome, Jake”—in her dream when he...when they...

“Totally cool, Jake.”

She had never said that in her dream.

“Kevin?” She shot up in bed. “Kevin?”

“Out here, Mom!”

“Where?” She tore out of the bedroom, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. She ran into his bedroom, but he wasn’t there. She checked the bathroom. “Kevin?” Barely breathing, she raced to the door and tore it open.

“Hi, Mom!”

Her son was astride a big black horse—Killer Bee. He was belted into some kind of special saddle with a high back and sides. Jake Dixon was standing next to him with reins in his hand. They both were petting the horse and smiling like they hadn’t a care in the world.

When she caught something extra in Jake’s grin, she realized that she was barefoot on the front porch of the Trail Boss Cabin in her red satin nightgown with spaghetti straps, a buy-one-get-one-free special from WalMart.

She crossed her arms in front of her, sure that Jake could see how cold she actually was.

“Kevin,” she began in her scolding-mom tone.

“Aw...don’t be mad at me. I got up early and saw Jake at the corral. We had breakfast in the bunkhouse with all the cowboys. It was so cool, Mom. Joe Watley was there. And Gilbert. And Ty Watson, T.J., and Trace and...”

She held her hand up to stop him from naming every cowboy in the bunkhouse. “You should have asked me, Kevin. Also, I don’t think you should be taking up so much of Mr. Dixon’s time.”

She studied Jake. He was clean-shaven. She looked for signs of a hangover, but his eyes were bright and clear. He tipped his hat back with a thumb, a gesture she had seen more than once. It was as if he were saying “Look me over. I don’t care.”

So she looked.

“Kev’s not bothering me. I enjoy his company.”

“That may be true, but Kevin shouldn’t have left the cabin without letting me know.”

“He said he didn’t want to wake you, and that you were snoring up a storm.” Jake chuckled.

“I certainly do not snore!” Beth protested.

“Mom, you were sucking the walls in.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. Running a hand through her hair, she realized that it was tangled. In spite of the cold, she felt a warm flush as Jake Dixon’s blatant gaze swept over her again.

“Mr. Dixon, may I impose on you to watch Kevin a while longer while I get dressed?”

“Of course. I’m just going to let Kevin walk Killer around the paddock. Take your time.”

“Be careful, Kevin. Nothing fancy, okay? And listen to Mr. Dixon.”

“I will. I will.” His voice had that “quit nagging me” tone to it, but she couldn’t help herself. She always worried.

As she was about to go back into the cabin, Emily Dixon turned the corner and waved to her. “Beth, you’re just the person I’m looking for.”

“Good morning, Emily.” She slumped over in another attempt to make her nightgown appear longer. “Please come inside. I need to get dressed.”

“Good morning, boys.” She gave Kevin and Jake a wave. Turning back to Beth, she said, “Stay put. I’ll make it quick. I need another volunteer for the overnight campout, a woman to assist the girls in the program. Now, I know you are on vacation, and you need a break from— Well, I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate. Can you help us out?”

“Certainly,” she said without hesitation. If she was assisting Wheelchair Rodeo, she could keep an eye on Kevin.

“But, Mrs. Dixon, my mom doesn’t know how to ride,” Kevin said. “She won’t be able to go on the trail ride and campout.”

“I can take care of teaching your mother how to ride,” Jake said.

His blue eyes sparkled in the morning sun like twin sapphires. She didn’t particularly want to be in Jake Dixon’s company all that much. In just the short time she’d known him, she was already feeling a pull toward him. And now she was having erotic dreams about him. Why?

He was stirring up feelings that she hadn’t known she had, as well as fears about Brad and his drinking that she’d tried to bury, along with her husband.

She saw an amused look on Emily Dixon’s face. It was as if she knew that Beth was trying to fight an attraction to Jake.

“Thank you, son.” Emily kissed Jake on the cheek as she walked by him, then she was off down the path that led to the ranch house. “Breakfast is still being served in the mess hall, Beth,” she said over her shoulder as she disappeared around the corner.

Beth was suddenly too nervous to eat. “I’ll be ready in a half hour,” she said to Jake. “I guess I should pick out a horse.”

“I’ll pick one out for you if you’d like,” Jake said.

She nodded and turned to go into the cabin, then turned back. “Jake? Mr. Dixon?”

“Yes, ma’am?” He waited patiently for her to continue.

She didn’t know if she could ask the question she wanted to without sounding like a fool. But what the heck? “Do you have a black horse with four white socks?”

He studied her as if trying to figure out the reason for her request. To his credit, he didn’t laugh. “I believe I do.”

Well, she was in this far, she might as well let him think she was completely out of her mind. “Do you have a horse with four white socks named Thunder, by any chance?” she asked.

“Thunder?” He raised an eyebrow.

His eyes met hers. The moment hung between them and then he smiled. A look of gentle understanding crossed his tanned face.

“Yeah. Yes. I do have a horse named Thunder. And he has four white socks.”

She knew he wasn’t telling the truth, but the white lie moved him up a couple of notches in her estimation.

“Could I have that horse?” she asked.

“Sure.”

Smiling, she hurried into the cabin and shut the door. Leaning against it, she clamped a hand over her mouth to control the giddiness that bubbled up from somewhere. She felt happy, euphoric, as if she were flying. She released her hand and her laughter overflowed.

Maybe her strange mood was due to her relief that Kevin was okay. Maybe it was because she was going to ride a horse after all these years. Maybe it was because she got a good night’s sleep. But it was not, definitely not, because she had dreamed about Jake all night, then awoken to see him so attentive toward her son.

Kevin would have memories that he'd cherish forever, and she'd always be grateful to Jake Dixon for that.

She was glad that she was going to help out with Wheelchair Rodeo. Since they'd both received a "scholarship" to WR, it gave her the opportunity to contribute something to the program. WR was something special.

She rushed to her room, plucked a pair of jeans and a T-shirt out of her suitcase and hurried to the shower.

Twenty minutes later, refreshed and dressed, she stepped out onto the porch of her cabin. She walked toward the barn and saw Jake sitting on the corral fence, waiting for her.

Jake felt Beth's gaze on the back of his neck, watching his every move with Kevin. A prickle of irritation shot through him. What did she think he was going to do? Toss the boy, wheelchair and all, into his pickup and hit the honky-tonks?

Finally, with her reluctant permission, he handed Kevin and Killer over to bronc rider K.C. Morris and sent them to the Chisholm Trail, a short, easy walking path that meandered behind the dining hall and the bunkhouse, then circled back to the barn.

That would be enough for Kevin for the day. He was using new muscles, and Jake didn't want to overwhelm the little guy. Then K.C. could help Kev unsaddle Killer, brush him down and clean the tack.

"There isn't anything K.C. doesn't know about kids or horses," he reassured Beth. "He comes from a family of nine kids and owns some of the finest horses in Texas."

That didn't seem to impress her. It was Kevin's hopeful "Please, Mom?" that did it.

Jake felt sorry for the kid. Although he liked the thought that Beth would be helping out on the overnight, she was a bit too overprotective and stifling. He'd bet his last saddle that Kevin needed a break from her.

And she needed to relax.

As Kevin disappeared behind the pines, she bit her nails.

"You're next," Jake said, jumping down from the fence. He winced from the pain.

"Maybe when Kevin comes back."

"Beth, Kevin's fine. He's on a short, easy walking trail that we call the Chisolm Trail. I guarantee he's having the time of his life. C'mon, it's your turn. You're going to love the horse I picked out for you."

He gave a shrill whistle and a horse came trotting over. He watched Beth's face for her reaction. It was just as he'd expected. She broke into a big grin, and he swore she was going to jump right out of her skin.

Sidewinder, with his two white socks, belonged to his friend Dan Montague's son, Danny. Luckily, they'd loaned the gentle horse to Wheelchair Rodeo, along with several others they'd raised on their neighboring spread. Jake had painted two more socks on Sidewinder with white shoe polish. Beth's bright eyes and grin told him that it was well worth the trouble.

"She's a beauty, Jake. I don't know how to thank you."

"She's a 'he.'" He shook his head. "I can see my work is cut out for me!"

"What's his real name?"

"Thunder."

"No. Really—"

"Thunder," Jake insisted. "And he's ready for some exercise. Let's go saddle him up."

Jake opened the corral door for Beth. As Thunder nudged Beth's shirt pocket with his nose, she stepped back laughing.

He took her hand and dropped some sugar cubes onto her palm. "Flat on your hand."

"I remember."

His hand skimmed hers, and he felt as if he'd gone eight seconds with Prickly Pear again. When she looked up at him with her glittering green eyes, he felt as if he were free-falling. Sooner or later he knew he'd hit the ground and eat dirt.

Why couldn't he just walk away from Beth Conroy? He understood why he was drawn to her son. He saw the man he used to be in Kevin's adoring eyes—not an over-the-hill, washed-up bull rider who'd been keeping the Justin Sports Medicine Program busy. Hell, Beth was everything he didn't need—overprotective, stifling and bossy.

He didn't know the answer, but he was going to push it out of his mind and concentrate on Wheelchair Rodeo for now. If it killed him, he was going to be on top again. He'd win his event this Saturday, the Jake Dixon Gold Buckle Challenge. Then he'd pick up the PBR tour in August. He'd win the bull-riding Finals in Vegas in October. Maybe after that, he'd retire. Then again, maybe not.

But if he did, he would retire a winner.

"I'll show you how to saddle and bridle your horse," Jake said.

Beth signaled her muscles to relax and not bunch. A nervous giggle escaped. She tried to cover it with a cough.

"I'd bet my boots that you've never saddled a horse before," Jake said.

"Hope your socks are clean, because I'm going to win your boots." She reached up and petted Thunder. "I did saddle a horse—once—many years ago. And I certainly read enough books about it when I was a kid. It's probably like riding a bike."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to let you do it alone, not the first time—but you'll learn. Just like Kevin will learn. So will the rest of the kids who are cleared to ride. They'll get a lot of help, and they'll do what they can."

His hands moved to her waist. She jumped. He was only getting her into position, but her heart pumped hard, sending heat through her veins. His touch was harmless, not intimate at all. Yet it had been a long time since a man other than Brad had touched her. Every nerve in her body was humming.

Jake lifted an orange-and-gray blanket that was draped over a metal stand and handed it to her. "Put that on his back. It's made of heavy wool—cushions the horse from saddle sores and absorbs the sweat."

She took the blanket and placed it on Thunder.

"Now the saddle. It weighs about thirty-five pounds. Can you handle it?"

"Kevin weighs much more than that, and I lift him."

He felt the muscles in her upper arm and grinned. "I'm impressed. You're a tough lady."

"I just do what I have to."

The smile left his face. "It must be difficult for you."

"He's my son."

"If you don't mind me saying so, you overprotect him."

She stared at him until she finally found her voice. "What gives you the right to judge me, Mr. Dixon?"

"I can tell that—"

"Do you have a degree in child psychology?" She picked up the saddle and flung it on Thunder's back. She could have flung Jake Dixon up there, too.

"I see you—"

"Mr. Dixon, what I think you need to do is concentrate on roping and riding the range and doing whatever else a cowboy does. Leave the child rearing to someone who has a child to rear."

"How do you know I don't have a child? Or a good dozen of them?"

"All your publicity says..." A vein pumped on his temple. She'd hit a nerve.

"Don't believe everything you read," he snapped. He took a couple of deep breaths and pushed his hat back. "Look, Beth, I didn't mean to upset you. I was only going to say that you need to give the kid and yourself a break."

Maybe she was too overprotective of Kevin, but that was because she was determined not to let anything more happen to her son. She realized that she couldn't guarantee she'd be able to keep him safe forever, but she could sure as hell try.

"Let's get back to the lesson," she said.

He held his hands up in surrender. "I'll drop it." He grinned. "For now."

"Forever."

He moved his hat back to its usual position. "Lift the left stirrup and hook it over the horn. Good. Grab the cinch strap. Good. Pull it through. Good. You got it. Nothing to it. Now tighten it up. Harder."

She grunted and tightened the strap as much as she could. She wasn't a weakling. After the accident she had developed muscles that she hadn't known she had.

"Now what?"

Jake gripped the saddle horn and jerked it. "Not good enough. Thunder puffed himself up."

"He did what?"

"He doesn't like being cinched, so he swells himself up. Brace yourself with a knee against his ribs—" he pointed "—about here."

"I can't do that!"

"It won't hurt him."

"I still can't do it."

"Okay." He nudged Thunder with a knee. "Don't make me get ugly in front of the lady, horse. She adores you. Knock it off."

Jake easily tightened the cinch another few inches.

"Good boy." Jake fed him a piece of carrot and turned to Beth.

He handed her a bridle. "Go for it."

She stared down at the leather and metal in her hand, then at Thunder's big yellow teeth. "I guess you can keep your boots on after all. I don't remember this part."

"Hold the bridle like this, and slip it under his chin and up over his eyes like this."

She tried to concentrate as he demonstrated, but instead she noticed the faint scar that started just below Jake's ear and ran to his jaw.

"This is a split-ear bridle. It goes around each ear. The bit rests forward in the horse's mouth."

He stopped as Thunder's mouth opened. "See? Thunder's used to it. He knows what to do even if you don't."

"Thank goodness."

"You ready to try it?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Relax. He's not going to bite you."

His arms wrapped around her from behind. She could feel every hard muscle, every mountain and valley of his body against hers. His crotch bumped against her backside. She tried not to notice. Oh, sure.

He helped her guide the bridle into place. "See? Nothing to it," he said.

Why am I so warm?

She turned and found herself staring at Jake's full lips. They turned up into a sly grin.

He was so close, so overwhelmingly masculine, and she had a strong desire to get away from him. She stepped back.

"Drop 'em."

"What?"

"Drop the reins to the ground. Thunder's a cattle horse. He's trained to stand still when the reins are dropped to the ground."

She just couldn't think around him, and she hated to feel so out of control, so disjointed. "Oh. You want me to drop the reins."

She did as instructed. Thunder stood as still as a statue in a park.

"Ready to ride?"

She nodded, feeling like she was a kid again. She was at the horse barn at the state fair. Only this time, the horse was hers.

He patted the horse's neck. "Cowboy up!"

Her cheeks were flushed. Jake suspected it was because he made her nervous and she wasn't particularly fond of him. But perhaps she was just excited about riding the horse.

She sucked in a deep breath. "I guess this is how Kevin feels. Maybe he's more like me than I've given him credit for."

"Ah, so you're a cowgirl at heart?"

"When I was a girl, I wanted a horse more than anything in the world." She petted Thunder's neck. "We lived in a tract house, so there wasn't enough land for a horse. Even if my father had bought one, he couldn't afford to stable it."

Jake couldn't imagine growing up without horses and cattle. He needed wide-open spaces. "Out here, just about every kid grows up with a horse, or dozens of them."

"This means a lot to me. How can I thank you, Mr. Dixon?"

"By calling me Jake, for heaven's sake."

She started to protest, then her jaws shut. "Okay."

He let out a long, low whistle. "Finally."

He held Sidewinder's...er...Thunder's reins and lightly touched her arm. "Up you go."

Jake gave her a gentle push on her cute behind. She landed in the saddle and grinned down at him. "It's pretty high up here."

"You'll get used to it." He handed her the reins, and she took them. She clutched the saddle horn, her knuckles turning white. "Relax, Beth. Take a deep breath and relax. Thunder won't do anything stupid."

She took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. "But I'm afraid I might."

"I personally tested him for Wheelchair Rodeo. He's a good, calm horse. Just relax and enjoy."

He showed her how to hold the reins. "I'm just going to lead him around the corral until you get used to the motion."

"Ramon!" He cupped his hands and shouted to a group of cowboys who were watching intently. "As long as you're just sitting there looking pretty, would you mind saddling Lance for me?"

One of them jumped down from the fence. "You got it, bro."

Jake continued to walk Thunder around the corral. She noticed that the more they circled, the worse Jake limped. No doubt the loose soil was taking a toll on whatever was wrong with him.

"I'm comfortable now, Jake. I can see you limping. Wait until Ramon brings your horse out."

"Move forward in the saddle."

"Huh?"

"Move forward."

She did, and before she could blink, Jake had swung a leg up behind her and they were both sitting on the saddle. His arms and thighs were tight around her and she felt him snug against her bottom.

She sat up straight and tried to put a breath of air between them, but there was none to be had. She could smell the laundry soap clinging to his shirt and his unique scent, a tantalizing mixture of pine and leather.

He made a clicking sound and moved the reins. Thunder turned and walked, and she felt the animal's hardness against her, rocking...rocking...

"A couple more times and then we'll take a slow ride on the Chisholm Trail," he said.

His voice was low and seductive in her ear. She wanted to lean her head back on his chest and feel the vibration of his deep voice passing through her.

Instead, she struggled to take her mind off him.

She finally found her voice. "I'd like to ride the Chisholm Trail."

"We also have the Santa Fe Trail and the Dixon Trail and a couple more. They go up in level of difficulty. Guests can only go on the trails I approve them for. The cowboys who work here get a copy of my list each morning, and it's posted in the bunkhouse. No one can go to the next trail unless I pass them."

Jake Dixon ran a tight ranch, and against her better judgment she was starting to like him.

But she still wasn't sure she could trust him with her son.

Chapter Four

Ramon led Lance over. Jake steered Thunder to the corral fence and got off using one of the slats. He immediately felt better with the pressure of Beth's body off his groin. If he had spent any more time snug in the saddle with Beth, he would have embarrassed himself.

Beth was watching his every move. He would have thought that she was interested in him, but he knew better. She was taking his measure, and interested in riding Thunder somewhere other than in a circle around the corral.

"Ready for the Chisholm Trail, city slicker?" he asked.

She grinned. "Round 'em up, move 'em out. Lead the way, cowboy."

He liked it when she loosened up and joked with him.

"Our Chisholm Trail goes from behind the mess hall to behind the cabins. It ends at your cabin. Then we cross the bridge over the Gold Buckle River and end up right back here."

She looked toward where he pointed. "Here comes Kevin!" she said, waving.

"Kevin and K.C. Safe and sound," Jake said. "Kevin has a grin the size of a prize banana. Just like his mother." Her happiness made Jake feel that his time was well spent. "Shall we hit the trail?"

"I'm ready."

"Follow me."

Jake watched Beth's face as she rode. She focused intently, yet she had a look of pure pleasure. A gentle breeze blew her golden hair back from her face, and her lips parted in a slight smile. Her eyes were bright, and she seemed to have more energy than she had the day before.

That's what he liked about the Gold Buckle. It gave the guests the opportunity to experience new things—things they couldn't do at home.

Wheelchair Rodeo was part of that, but to see a sunrise on a cool, crisp Wyoming morning, to see the eagles fly and the mountains up close...well, there was nothing better.

It was a good stress reliever, and Beth Conroy needed to relieve a lot of stress.

Maybe he'd find time to take her on a trail ride of their own. They could camp in the wildflowers at the foot of Old Baldy. Then they'd take a nice, cool skinny-dip in the little creek that runs along the trail. He'd get Cookie to pack one of his special picnic lunches and throw in a cold jug of his homemade lemonade.

He'd build a campfire and they'd sleep under the stars, snuggled together. He'd catch some fish for breakfast, and he'd filet and cook them while Beth made the coffee....

He had to be loco. Maybe that was his idea of a perfect date, but Beth didn't seem the camping type. She'd probably want to get dressed up and go somewhere fancy. Besides, camping would mean leaving Kevin in the bunkhouse with the cowboys. She'd never agree to that.

And for what he was thinking, he couldn't take Kevin.

But it didn't make sense to get any closer to her. Women liked hearth and home. That was his experience, anyway. Oh, they might like sex once in a while, but basically they really wanted to settle down.

Not him. He followed the rodeos and the bull riding. When he was healthy, he traveled to about forty events a year—about thirty of those were strictly bull-riding events where his ranking qualified him for the Finals in Las Vegas. Another dozen or so were small rodeos where he rode more bulls just to keep in shape.

He was a bull rider. It was more than what he did. It was who he was.

Beth deserved someone who could be a husband to her and a father to Kevin.

Why was he even thinking along those lines? When he was stomped on by White Whale in Loughlin, some of his brains must have leaked out on the arena dirt.

No settling down for him. Even if he were the type, he certainly wouldn't marry Beth Conroy. She had baggage. He had goals. He was going to be on top again. He was going to win the Finals in October.

He glanced at Beth. She had her face turned up to the summer sun. He pictured her in that little slip of a nightgown she had on this morning, and thought again of making love to her.

The sun must be cooking his brain.

"You should wear a hat," he told Beth. "The sun'll get to you after a while." Just like it was getting to him.

"This is wonderful. Absolutely wonderful." She leaned over to pat Thunder's neck.

"Glad you're having fun."

"I am."

It did his heart good to see her finally relaxing and not worrying so much. He could tell that she needed a break from everything, especially the demands of caring for a physically challenged child.

He turned his face up to the sun and grinned. This was one benefit of Wheelchair Rodeo he hadn't counted on—and probably neither had Beth.

Following Jake wasn't easy, or maybe it was. Beth couldn't keep her eyes off his backside. His jeans were taut across his butt, and his butt was firmly planted in the saddle. As Lance walked, Jake swayed.

His crisp, checkered shirt was tucked into his jeans as usual. Silver conchos on his brown leather belt glinted in the sun, calling attention to his slim waist.

He was driving her crazy.

She attributed her fascination with him to the fact that she'd been without any kind of male companionship for several years. Even when she was married to Brad, she'd felt alone. Brad had found companionship with his cases of beer and with his pals at work and at the golf course.

Brad had never wanted her to work, claiming "breadwinner" status. It was what he'd wanted, and truthfully she enjoyed puttering. She had never wanted for anything, other than a sober husband and father to Kevin. Her only diversion had been making their house into a showpiece.

"It'll help my career," Brad had insisted. "The house will reflect the fact that I'm well-off and successful, and I'll attract higher caliber clients."

Just as she was about to divorce him, Brad had tried once again to remain sober. After he died and she was sorting through his papers—their papers—she discovered thousands of dollars' worth of outstanding bills that a whole battalion of high-caliber stock investors couldn't pay for.

Since he'd never let her take care of the finances, she hadn't known how far beyond their means they were living. It was stupid of her for not insisting that they at least share the financial tasks. It was even more stupid to stay with Brad for as long as she had, but she didn't want to end up like her parents, with seven marriages between them. She'd thought it would be better for Kevin to grow up with both parents, but apparently she'd been wrong.

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