



HOW TO LASSO A COWBOY

CHRISTINE WENGER

Cherish



Christine Wenger

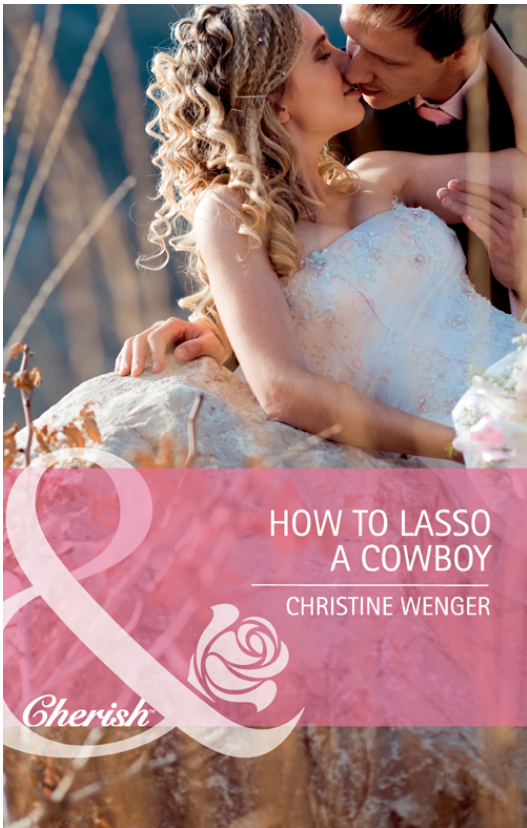
How to Lasso a Cowboy

Аннотация

CATCHING HERSELF A COWBOY WAS THE LAST THING ON HER MIND...Until one moved in with her! Well, technically bull-rider Dustin Morgan was staying at her brother's house for the summer – but so was Jenna. Having her high-school crush under the same roof was not the way she'd planned on spending her holiday. Especially since Dustin had never, ever so much as flirted with her. But maybe it was time the plain-Jane changed all of that. On the verge of turning thirty, Jenna knew it was high time to go after what she wanted...and she wanted Dustin. Using a magazine article called "Ten Ways to Seduce a Man," she set out to lasso her cowboy. But what would she do with him once she caught him?

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Dustin Morgan. If possible, he looked better than he had in high school.

Jenna could never forget the guy who flirted with every girl in school—everyone but her.

“Hello, Dustin. It’s been a while.” She offered her hand. So far, so good.

He took her hand for several heartbeats and held it before he finally shook it. She could feel the calluses on his palms and fingers. Dustin stared down at their hands, and so did she.

It was a simple thing, just a handshake, but she felt like a giddy schoolgirl again instead of a rocksolid teacher who was soon to be thirty years old.

“I guess you’re stuck with me,” he said.

She pulled her hand away. Maybe then her brain would work. “I—I guess I am.”

Dear Reader,

How to Lasso a Cowboy continues my GOLD BUCKLE COWBOYS miniseries—stories about bronc riders, bull riders and the cowboy next door.

When I was writing this book, it reminded me of the trials and tribulations of high school and “unrequited love.” I certainly remember my first crush, and so does Jenna Reed, the heroine of this story.

Jenna was drawn to bull rider Dustin Morgan when they were students, and Jenna didn’t go unnoticed by Dustin, either. When they went their separate ways, their attraction smoldered. Reunited years later and virtually living under the same roof, old feelings resurface. Jenna decides that she’s waited long enough for Dustin, so she decides to lasso her cowboy—finally! But does she really know how?

I hope this story will make you smile or even laugh out loud. And I'd love to hear from you. Contact me at PO Box 2000, Cicero, NY, 13039, USA or visit me at www.christinewenger.com.

Christine Wenger

About the Author

CHRISTINE WENGER has worked in the criminal justice field for more years than she cares to remember. She has a 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.

Chris would love to hear from readers. She can be reached by mail at PO Box 2000, Cicero, NY, 13039, USA or through her website at www.christinewenger.com.

How to Lasso
a Cowboy
Christine Wenger



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my St Margaret's, Ludden and Powelson buddies,
Janice Egloff DiFant and Patty Tomeny Holgado.
Time sure flies, but we're still having fun!

Prologue

Jenna Reed studied the new clothes that she'd bought for her long-awaited trip to Europe. They were organized by day, stacked in neat piles on the bed in her guest room and her matched set of tomato-red luggage was open and ready to be filled.

She reread the now dog-eared itinerary that she'd received from Happy Singles Travel, Inc. She knew it by heart, but she still loved looking at it. Their motto was printed in lime green on the top of their letterhead: "Travel with us, meet new friends and discover new places."

She would have rather traveled with her current friends, but they were all too tied up with their husbands and/or kids. Though she was disappointed, she understood. So, she was going with seventy-five other singles, mostly women, for three glorious weeks in Europe!

Finally, Jenna was going to live it up. She hadn't had a vacation since she'd started teaching fourth grade after college. When other teachers at Wilson Road Grammar School took the summer off, she worked summer school and tutored kids whenever she was asked. Among her peers, she was the teacher who never said no.

She loved teaching mostly because of the kids. She thought of them as *hers* and threw her whole being into her work. But they

weren't her kids, and at age twenty-nine, she'd given up looking for Mr. Right. She just wanted Mr. Right *Now*. Someone special. Someone she could hang out with and who liked to do the same things that she did.

She'd once wanted to settle down and have children, but all that changed when she approached her thirtieth birthday. With no romantic prospects, she decided that she had too much living to do—and *now* was the time for her to enjoy life. So she cut her workload and began making plans to change her life from a humdrum, staid existence to one of excitement and adventure.

As part of her new life plan, Jenna decided to make a drastic career change and applied for a yearlong position teaching English in China. Every time she thought of her application being accepted and making a move, excitement shot through her.

Even if she didn't get the position, she'd take a leave of absence and travel, visiting places that she'd only read about. And this European vacation would be the perfect start to her new plan.

Jenna sat on the edge of the bed, holding on to her itinerary, and imagined meeting her knight in shining armor at a bistro in Paris or at the Parthenon in Greece. Maybe he'd strike up a conversation with her as she watched him maneuver his yacht through the glittering waters of Cannes or bump into him on the Rialto Bridge in Venice.

Wherever her mystery man was, she wanted him to know that she'd be landing at Heathrow Airport in London in exactly seven days, ten hours and thirty-two minutes.

The phone rang, startling her out of her daydream. She rushed to pick it up.

“Hey, sis.”

“Tom! How are you?”

Calling her brother was on her list of things to do. She’d planned on letting him know when she was leaving on her trip. Then her excitement dissolved. Her brother only called her when he needed something or if it was bad news. She braced herself.

“I called about Andy—” he began.

She just adored her ten-year-old nephew. “Oh, Tom! Is he okay?”

“Relax, Jenna. He’s fine. He just didn’t do well on his final report card. He’s failing reading and math. He’s going to be held back in fourth grade unless he goes to summer school.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Yup.” There was a moment of silence. “And since he could use some extra help, I thought of you, since you teach fourth grade. I figure if you came down here to Tucson, you could tutor him and babysit at the same time. I’ve been helping him myself, but I’m not doing that great of a job. He’s not getting it.”

“I’m sure he’s getting it, Tom. You’re a very patient father.”

Then something hit her—Tom had said *babysit*.

“Uh . . . Tom, why do you need me to babysit? Where are you going to be?”

“As long as you’re going to be here at the Bar R, I figured that I could enter as many bronc- and bull-riding events as I can

during the summer. It'd be the perfect opportunity for me to win some extra money, pay for some repairs that I need to do around my ranch. Besides, Andy needs braces, his babysitters are costing me a fortune and Marla just filed for divorce. I need to retain a lawyer.”

Jenna was silent. She knew that Tom was still reeling from his wife leaving him for another man. Marla said that traveling the bull-riding circuits kept him away from home too much.

“When do you need me?” Jenna asked.

“Next week.”

“Tom—” Jenna’s heart sank. Her brother never asked for anything, and she owed him so much. “I meant to call you, but time just got away from me. I’m supposed to leave for Europe on vacation this Tuesday. I’ll be gone for three weeks, but—”

There were no buts. She’d do anything for Tom and Andy. After their mother and father died in a terrible auto accident when Tom was a senior and she was a freshman in high school, Tom assumed the role of parent even though they lived with their grandparents. It was Tom, the champion bull rider, who’d helped her with her college tuition. It was Tom who loaned her the money for a down payment on her house when she got her teaching job in Phoenix.

And Andy was the sweetest nephew an aunt could have, and Jenna knew that Tom needed the extra money. Besides, she didn’t want Andy to have trouble in school.

She sighed. Her European vacation was spinning down the

toilet, but her family needed her. Still, she held on tighter to her itinerary, not wanting to part with it.

“Sis, I understand. I can make other arrangements.”

“Don’t you dare,” Jenna said adamantly. “I can postpone my trip.” She’d waited this long to spread her wings, she could wait a little longer. “And I took out travel insurance, so there’s really no problem.”

She stared at the new clothes that she’d bought throughout the year, just for this trip. The clothes were totally inappropriate for the summer at Tom’s ranch in Tucson. She’d need old shirts, old shorts and even older jeans. And her beat-up old cowboy boots. If Tom wasn’t going to be around, she’d probably have to do some work around his ranch, too. And she sure as hell didn’t need her new navy raincoat in the Arizona desert.

“A week from today, then,” Jenna said. “I’ll drive down in the morning, and get there around noon. Is that okay?” Instead of flying to Europe on that day, she’d be driving to Tom’s ranch.

She could hear Tom let out a relieved breath. “I can’t thank you enough. I really appreciate this.”

“It’ll be great to spend time with Andy,” she said, meaning every word. “How long are you going to be gone, Tom?”

“As long as I can. And as long as Andy is okay with me being gone. He’ll be thrilled that you’re going to come for a visit, so he won’t miss me all that much. I had a little talk with him and prepared him in case you said yes, and he understood. He said that he was going to root for me and Uncle Dustin on television.”

“Uncle” Dustin Morgan wasn’t Andy’s real uncle. He was an old friend of Tom’s from high school. The two had been traveling together from rodeo to rodeo for years.

Every time she talked with Andy, most of the conversation centered on Dustin, a man she’d thought about with steady frequency since she’d first laid eyes on him in algebra class in freshman year at Catalina High School in Tucson.

“Uh ... um ...” Tom began. “Speaking of Dustin, I invited him to come and stay at the ranch when he’s released from the hospital. He needs to heal up a bit from his accident.”

Jenna knew from watching the Albuquerque event on TV that Dustin seriously injured his ankle when a bull stepped on him. She worried about his injury and worried even more when the sports medicine doctor for the bull riders stated that he was being taken to a nearby hospital for emergency surgery.

But wait ... was Tom expecting her to take care of Dustin? He couldn’t possibly think that she’d know what to do. She was a teacher, not a nurse.

“Tom, you asked Dustin to stay at the ranch?” Her heart began racing when she realized that Dustin Morgan would be living under the same roof with her.

“Yeah. He’s going to stay here with you and Andy and look after the ranch for me. He won’t be any trouble for you.”

What she remembered about Dustin from high school was her intense crush on him, but she’d been too much of a geek to even relax around him. She’d longed to date him, but he was way too

popular, and she was way too much of a bookworm for them to have anything in common.

The only thing they had in common was Tom, and Jenna couldn't wait until Tom brought Dustin over to their house.

Then she remembered the sadness she felt when he was offered a full ride—a complete, four-year scholarship to the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. Instead of accepting it, he'd hit the circuit to compete with the Professional Bull Riders. He never graduated with their senior class.

What a waste, she thought, although he made a small fortune riding bulls.

“Dustin can help you out with Andy, too,” Tom added.

She was about to tell him that she didn't need any help with Andy, and that she'd feel uncomfortable practically living with Dustin Morgan, but it sounded like a done deal.

No trouble?

She doubted that.

“Thanks again, Jenna. You know I appreciate this, and so does Dustin. Andy will, too, when he passes to fifth grade.”

“No problem, Tom,” she lied. “See you next Monday.”

They hung up, and Jenna just sat, reeling.

Looking down, she saw that she was still clutching her itinerary. Soon, she'd have to call and cancel her wonderful trip.

After a while, she lovingly placed the item into her brand-new tomato-red, twenty-nine-inch upright with the 360-degree wheels.

Maybe she had to cancel for now, but as soon as possible, she'd reschedule—just as soon as Tom figured out when he'd return. She was needed by her family, and that was okay.

But it seemed as though she was always needed, mostly by those she called the “four Ps”: her pupils, their parents, the principal or her peers, and she always had to postpone her dreams of romance and adventure.

She sighed. Now, Dustin Morgan, fresh from the hospital, needed her.

Then she smiled as she began to pick up her clothes. She might still be a geek, and Dustin might be one of the most popular bull riders in the PBR, but maybe her stay at the Bar R would somehow give her a chance to spread her wings, just like she'd planned to do on her European trip.

And maybe ... Just maybe ... Dustin would turn out to be the adventure of a lifetime.

Chapter One

Dustin Morgan struggled to get out of a taxi in front of Tom Reed's ranch house.

He tugged his crutches out of the vehicle and positioned them under his arms while the driver unloaded his duffel bag.

Unfortunately, in the short-go round in Albuquerque, a bucking, whirling, two-thousand-pound Brahma named Cowabunga bucked him off, then stomped on his ankle, crushing it. After surgery, Dustin sported a massive amount of hardware to keep his bones together, along with a heavy cast.

Damn it.

Thanks to Cowabunga, he'd have to skip the usually profitable summer circuit.

After a couple of years of always being a bridesmaid, he'd finally hit number one in the rankings, and now he couldn't ride. While he sat at home and watched the Professional Bull Riders on TV with his leg up, there'd be several young guns who would jump over him in the standings. But maybe, if everything went as planned, when he got back he could move up again in time for the PBR World Finals in Las Vegas in early November. Fingers crossed.

He paid the taxi driver, turned toward the house and took a hearty breath. He could smell the scent of animals on the air. Damn, how he loved that smell!

He was itching to do something where he could work up a sweat, but his surgeon had told him to take it easy. Dustin couldn't grasp that concept. There had never been a time when he'd taken it easy.

When he was younger, he entered junior rodeos and rode anything with fur. As a sophomore in high school, he played football and caught rodeos every chance he could. When he turned eighteen, he was able to qualify for the Professional Bull Riders circuit as well as the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association. He rode bulls in the PBR. In the PRCA, he rode broncs.

And he'd managed to avoid serious injury—until now.

Dustin studied the long ranch house and the outbuildings of the Bar R Ranch. Someday, he'd have a spread like this.

He looked at his duffel bag lying on the Arizona dust. Dustin couldn't believe that he'd agreed to stay at Tom's place. The only thing that had convinced him to come here was the fact that Tom needed him—and to be honest, he owed Tom big time. Tom had saved his life two years ago by pushing him away from a rogue bull. His friend would always sport scars from being gored.

"I have a favor to ask of you," Tom had said when he'd visited Dustin in the hospital after his surgery.

Dustin had struggled to stay focused, still a little groggy from the painkillers he'd been given. "Hit me with it."

"Since you're going to be laid up for a while, how about heading to my ranch and overseeing the operation? I don't want

you to work, just supervise the foreman and the hands. You're going to be recuperating anyway—how about doing it at the Bar R?"

"I—I don't—"

"My sister will be there taking care of Andy for me. And Andy would just love a visit from you. It's been a long time, Dustin."

"Jenna?" His eyelids drifted closed for a moment, but Jenna's image appeared in his mind. In high school lugging a load of books. Studying under the big tree by the school cafeteria while everyone else was having fun. Being elected class president every year for four years. Giving the valedictorian speech at graduation.

He'd always liked her energy, her sense of independence, her willingness to get involved and the fact that she was comfortable being alone and didn't follow the crowd, like he always had.

Back then, she'd had long blond hair that she usually wore in a ponytail tied with a piece of rawhide and usually pierced by at least one pen and one pencil. That was Jenna, always studying, always writing in a notebook. Her spring-green eyes were magnified by wire-rimmed glasses that rode low on her nose.

He'd spent many a high school class secretly watching her.

He'd wanted to talk to Jenna on numerous occasions—to ask her out—but he'd always thought that she wouldn't give him the time of day. It wasn't as if she was a snob—she was very friendly to everyone but him—so he figured that Tom had told her to stay away from him. Tom was very protective of Jenna after the

death of his parents, and Dustin had to admit that he'd had many girlfriends. Jenna could see that for herself. But they were just friends—or they were buckle bunnies—and they weren't Jenna.

So, to get his Jenna fix, Dustin often went to Tom's house, not only to hang out with Tom, but to catch a glimpse of her, too.

"You're going to need someone to help you manage," Tom continued. "With your folks being in Alaska and your apartment on the third floor of a building without elevators, you don't have much of a choice. You help me, and Jenna will help you."

There was something wrong with his reasoning, but Dustin couldn't put his finger on it back at the hospital. If only Tom would leave so he could sleep.

Sleep ... blessed sleep. The pain was exhausting him, and he didn't want to take too many pain pills if he could help himself.

"It's okay with Jenna," Tom said. "She's looking forward to seeing you again."

That struck Dustin as strange. He doubted if Jenna even remembered him from high school. He hadn't had a decent conversation with her in years. Matter of fact, the last time he'd talked to Jenna for any length of time was at Andy's christening ten years ago. He was Andy's godfather; Jenna was Andy's godmother.

Now, as he stood at the gate of Tom's ranch, he remembered the promise he'd made to Tom years ago—a promise he regretted to this day. He'd given his word to Tom that he'd stay away from Jenna. Therefore, his interaction with her was limited to

fleeting glances and some short blips of conversation whenever she attended the PBR events.

He might as well be back in high school.

Dustin flung his duffel over his right shoulder and thought of Tom. When you traveled with a man to and from rodeos you got to know him really well. Tom was more than a good friend, he was like a brother, and he didn't want to betray Tom's trust.

Dustin had almost told Tom that he wasn't going to stay at his ranch to recuperate. He didn't want to be a burden on Jenna or on anyone. He could take care of himself—somehow, someway—but he hadn't been able to find his voice.

He remembered falling asleep, dreaming of spending the summer with pretty, smart Jenna Reed. In his dream, Jenna didn't think of him as the class clown, the class jock or as someone who didn't take advantage of a four-year scholarship to hit the road to ride bulls. She thought of him only as a man.

But this wasn't a dream. This was reality, and he was about to spend most of the summer with Jenna.

Then again, maybe it *was* a dream.

“Aunt Jenna?” Andy said sweetly. “Can I go outside now? I want to watch the guys break Maximus.”

Jenna smiled and ran her fingers through her nephew's sandy hair. His blue eyes were wide with hope. How could math and reading compete with a bucking bronc?

“Do the first seven decimal problems and you can go. We'll do reading comprehension later.”

She leaned over to Andy and pointed to the problems on page fifteen of his math book. She'd seen progress with Andy during the week that she'd been tutoring him, and she didn't want to lose the momentum.

She did the breakfast dishes as Andy labored over his workbook.

The doorbell rang. "I'll get it," Jenna said, walking into the living room to get the front door.

She looked through the peephole. Standing on the porch, propped up by a pair of crutches, was none other than Dustin Morgan.

His hair was darker than ever, and his eyes were as blue as the Arizona sky above. If possible, he looked better than he had in high school. Her cheeks heated just looking at him. TV didn't do him justice.

Jenna could never forget the guy who'd flirted with every girl in high school. That is, everyone but her.

He'd been a star quarterback and the best player on the basketball team in freshman and sophomore years as well as a rodeo champ. He had all the girls drooling over him, including her.

But he never paid her any attention. In fact, she was the only female he seemed to avoid.

And he'd turned down a full scholarship so he could ride with the PBR. Jenna had never been able to understand this.

She swung the door open, and he smiled widely. Her gaze

drifted to his crutches, his torn sweatpants and the cast that went from his foot to his knee.

“Hello, Dustin. It’s been a while.” She offered her hand. So far, so good.

He took her hand for several heartbeats and held it before he finally shook it. She could feel the calluses on his palms and fingers.

It was a simple thing, just a handshake, but at his touch, she felt like a giddy schoolgirl again instead of a levelheaded almost-thirty-year-old.

“It’s good to see you again, Jenna.”

He smiled warmly, and she could understand why a gaggle of buckle bunnies always vied for his attention.

“You, too. Although I see you on TV all the time at the bull riding events or ... or ...” She lost her train of thought for a moment. “But this arrangement is going to be ... different.”

Jenna could hear the quiver in her voice, and wondered why seeing Dustin up close and personal was unnerving her.

“I guess you’re stuck with me,” he said.

She pulled her hand away from his. Maybe then she’d relax. “I—I guess I am,” she blurted anxiously. Then, realizing what she said, she tempered her statement. “But you need help, and Tom said that you’re going to oversee the ranch, so that’ll help out. Besides, Andy is over-the-top thrilled that you’re going to be here.”

“It’ll be fun to spend time with the little cowboy,” he said.

She avoided his eyes and stared down at his cast and crutches. “I am sorry that you hurt your ankle. Cowabunga walked all over you.”

He pushed back his cowboy hat with his thumb. “Thanks. It wasn’t my best dismount, but I got lucky. It could have been a lot worse.”

Jenna shuddered. “You did get lucky.”

He shrugged. “You know what they say about bull riding—it’s not *when* you’ll get hurt, but how bad and how often.”

An awkward pause hung in the air between them. Were they doomed to make innocuous small talk the entire summer?

“Let’s go inside so you can sit down,” she said. “I’ll get your duffel.”

“I can get it,” he said quickly, scooping it up from the ground and then trying to get his crutches over the threshold.

She moved closer. “What can I do to help you?”

“Nothing. I can do it myself.” She heard the edge in his voice.

What was she supposed to do to assist him? He seemed put out that she even offered to help.

They’d better figure out a way to exist in harmony. Didn’t he understand that, for the most part, they’d be living together? She’d have to watch out for him, cook for him, do his laundry and help him get around on those crutches.

Would she have to help him bathe, too?

Her face heated in embarrassment and her heart raced at the thought of seeing Dustin Morgan naked.

Well, she'd wanted adventure and excitement, didn't she?

The cast was so awkward! It felt like he was lugging around an extra thirty pounds of dead weight. To make things worse, his duffel slipped off his shoulder, slid down his arm and crutch, and hit the floor of the porch.

He struggled to pick up the damn thing.

Jenna offered to help, but there was no way he wanted to impose on her—a woman that he barely knew but had adored from afar since high school. No way.

And there was that damn promise he'd made to Tom niggling at the back of his mind. Was this Tom's idea of a joke, having Jenna and him live together for several weeks? Or didn't Tom remember their conversation in the ambulance when Tom had saved Dustin's life?

Dustin remembered it very clearly.

"Thanks for saving my life, partner. I didn't see that bull heading for me. I owe you big-time," Dustin said.

"Forget it. You'd do the same to me. And the only thing you owe me is your promise."

Dustin held his breath. He knew what was coming.

"My sister. I see you looking at her." Tom winced in pain. "She's ... not as ... experienced as you are. She's been protected her whole life, first by my parents, then by me. You're like a brother, but you love the women too much. You'll hurt her, you know. And you know, you'll never be around for her, riding the circuit. She deserves someone who'll be home all the time."

Dustin looked at Jenna waiting for him to enter the house. He'd rather cut off his riding arm than hurt her, but his friend was right about him never being there for her—not when he was still riding—and he figured he had several good years left in him yet.

So Dustin renewed his promise to stay away from Jenna. But, again, maybe Tom had forgotten about it, or why else would he have asked him to stay at the ranch knowing that Jenna would be there?

As if on cue, Jenna snatched the duffel from him, and held the door open, giving him a wide berth to maneuver inside the living room.

Damn. He hated feeling like an invalid.

He should have holed up in his apartment, done things for himself. But the surgeon who'd operated told him that if he took it easy, he'd heal quicker, and he'd return to the PBR quicker.

That was his goal. He was poised to win the PBR World Finals in Vegas, and that was just what he was going to do. With the money he'd win, he could hang up his spurs and finally settle down on a ranch of his own.

That's what he'd been saving for all these years on the road. His own spread.

But first, he had to heal, and Tom had convinced him that this was the best place for him. Maybe it was—but being with Jenna 24/7 was a bonus.

“Uncle Dustin! Uncle Dustin!”

Andy came running into the living room of the Santa Fe-style

house and stopped two feet from where Dustin had collapsed into a side chair and stretched out his leg.

“Hey, partner! How’ve you been?” He held out his hand, and Andy shook it. “It’s been a long time.”

“I see you on TV all the time, you and my dad. Oh, and J.R., and Skeeter, and Cody and Robson and Adriano and—”

Dustin laughed as Andy named the entire roster of riders. The boy couldn’t be cuter. His eyes were bright blue, his hair sandy and he was probably taller than other kids his age. But ever since his mother had left, the spark had faded a bit from the boy’s eyes.

“I think you’ve gotten taller,” Dustin said.

Andy grinned. “Really?”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

As Andy read what his father and some of the other riders had written on Dustin’s cast, the cowboy eyed Jenna, who was sitting on the couch opposite him.

She was more beautiful than he remembered, all wholesome and not made up like the buckle bunnies he often met on the circuit. Her blond hair tickled her chin, and turquoise stones dangled from her ears.

He glanced at his duffel. It barely had enough clothes for two days. He’d only packed it for the Albuquerque bull riding, not for a stay in the hospital or for a long stay at Tom’s ranch. Beside it lay his crutches.

“I need to go shopping. All my clothes are in my apartment in Tubac,” he said mostly to himself.

“You live in Tubac? The artist colony?” Jenna asked wide-eyed.

“Yep. That Tubac.” He lived two floors above a shop that sold various types of jewelry, pottery and paintings.

“I’d be glad to drive you to your apartment,” Jenna said.

“I don’t want to impose on you any more.”

Tubac was an hour’s drive from Tucson. Maybe he could pay one of the ranch hands to drive him there and get some of his stuff.

He didn’t tell Jenna that he painted western scenes—riders on bucking bulls and broncs. Cowboys mending fence. The saguaros and mountains around Tubac and Tucson. It had been just for fun at first, but then he’d started selling his work through some of the local craft shops.

“Well, I’d better show you the guest room,” Jenna said, moving to hand him his crutches.

“I can do it.”

Her perfume drifted around him—something light and flowery. It suited her.

“You’re probably hungry, too. How about if I make you a sandwich or something?” Jenna asked.

“I promised Tom that I’d ramrod his ranch while I’m laid up. I’ll try and stay out of your way and not bother you.”

She shook her head. “It’s not a bother, Dustin. I’m happy to help.”

He was sure that she was trying to be polite, but he didn’t

intend to be a burden on her, or anyone. That wasn't his style. He was just here to help Tom while he was on the road, and he could do that on crutches.

And he was going to enjoy Jenna's company while he was here.

In spite of his injury, one good thing could come of it—he would finally get to know her better. But no matter how much he was still attracted to her, nothing would come of their close proximity—he'd see to that. He'd made a promise to Tom. And Dustin Morgan was a man of his word.

Jenna's senses were reeling as if she were back in high school. She tried to play it cool, just as she had back then, but her cool probably seemed standoffish.

Later, as she made Andy and Dustin ham-and-cheese sandwiches, she thought of Dustin's blue eyes—his sexy gaze was more intense than ever. His lips seemed more sensuous and his black hair looked even softer.

But his smile and good nature were what always charmed the high school girls. When he turned on his smile, flashing those whiter-than-white teeth, no female was immune.

Jenna had attended several PBR events through the years, but to see him up-close and personal for the first time in ages made her heart race and her cheeks heat. She hoped that as they spent more time together, she'd get over her high school reaction. After all, her schoolgirl crush on him was over. Wasn't it?

She was too old for crushes, darn it. She was just admiring a

handsome man. That's all.

At the table, Dustin and Andy were deep in conversation about bull riders and their statistics. Too bad that Andy didn't pay as much attention to his arithmetic as he did riding percentages.

Jenna smiled as she set the sandwiches down in front of them. "Anyone want anything to drink?"

"Please," Dustin said.

"Please," Andy said, and Jenna figured that if Dustin asked for a glass of fish oil, Andy would want the same. Just looking at Andy, she could see that the boy was under the spell of Dustin Morgan.

Well, Jenna Reed was going to fight her attraction. Her thirtieth birthday was right around the corner, for heaven's sake, and she wasn't going to fall for one guy. It was time for her to live, to explore and to take risks.

But how was she suppose to do that at Tom's ranch?

She set glasses of milk in front of Andy and Dustin. Dustin pulled out a chair for her from his sitting position as best he could. She smiled her thanks and sat down next to him, looked straight into his dark blue eyes and took a long breath.

"I prepared the guest room for you. It has its own bathroom and shower. I thought that would be more convenient." Jenna took a bite of her sandwich, but she was too nervous to eat any more, sitting so close to Dustin and inhaling his musky scent.

"Thank you. I'm dying to take a shower." He turned to Andy. "But I can't yet due to this dang cast. I can only take a bath, and

I can't get it wet."

A picture of Dustin naked flashed into her mind, and her throat went dry. She gulped down some milk.

"Jenna, you haven't said much," Dustin said. "We've got some catching up to do. What are you doing these days—are you still based in Phoenix?"

He leaned over the table as if prepared to give her his complete attention. That was another trait of Dustin's that made the females swoon.

"I've been teaching fourth grade. In my spare time—which isn't much—I coach the district's spelling-bee team and debate team."

Dustin took a bite of his sandwich. "That sounds like a full load."

"It keeps me busy," she said.

"So you're teaching the same grade that Andy had trouble with. No wonder Tom asked you to help him out." Dustin ruffled the boy's hair. "So how are you doing with your math and reading, partner?"

Andy shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"He's doing terrific," Jenna said, handing Andy his napkin so he'd wipe his mouth. "He's made a lot of progress already."

"It's bor-ring," Andy said, resting his cheek on his palm. "Totally bor-ring."

Dustin shrugged. "Well, maybe I could help,"

Andy nodded. "Cool, Uncle Dustin."

It was very nice of him to volunteer to help Andy, but Jenna was a little put out. She was a teacher, for goodness' sake—she could manage herself.

She tried to figure out something else to say. “How are your parents, Dustin? Tom told me that they like Alaska.”

“They love it. My father has taken up hunting again, and Mom has a nice circle of friends that she met at church.” He met her gaze. “I still miss your parents, Jenna. Your mom and dad were good to me.”

Jenna closed her eyes. She could still see the accident, although the police and Tom hadn't let her approach the scene.

Damn that drunk driver.

She blinked back her tears. “There's not a day that goes by that I don't miss them, too.”

Dustin cleared his throat. “Well, if you'll both excuse me, I think I need to rest a little. It's been a long trip.”

“I'll show you to the guest room,” Jenna said.

“I know where it is.”

Of course he did. He visited the ranch often.

“Do you need any help?” she asked.

“No.”

She frowned. “If you don't need help, then why are you here?”

He raised an eyebrow. “To supervise the ranch operation.”

“You're also here to rest and heal.”

Obviously, he wasn't the type to be waited on, but if he refused to let anyone help him, then what was she supposed to do?

Jenna followed Dustin into the hallway that led to his room, so Andy wouldn't overhear their discussion.

"Dustin?" she whispered.

He turned and raised an eyebrow.

"I can't understand why you are refusing my help."

"I'm not refusing. I just need to do things for myself."

She rolled her eyes. "But you can't do everything. Admit it."

"Maybe not, but I sure as hell am going to try."

"Why?"

"Because I always have, Jenna. I've always been self-sufficient. I don't know how to be anything else. I've been on my own since I was eighteen. I've had a lot of responsibility. I've seen a lot, done a lot and no one has ever held my hand through my injuries."

She felt a pang of sadness for him, although he didn't seem sorry for himself at all. He didn't have a home to return to in between bull riding events, not really. She knew his parents sold their ranch when Dustin graduated from high school and took off, and they continued to travel in a motor home. Dustin remained in the Tucson area. He didn't have family around. At least she had Tom.

In a way, Dustin had Tom, too.

But still, he needed help, and he was here. So was she.

"I know you want to remain self-sufficient, and I'll let you do that, as long as you don't hurt yourself doing so. How's that?"

He grinned and touched her arm. His hand callused from

riding, was warm to the touch.

“It works for me.”

“Good,” Jenna said, nodding. “Have a good rest.”

She returned to the kitchen, and while Andy finished his lunch, Jenna busied herself in the kitchen, thinking of her conversation with Dustin. She washed a handful of dishes and put everything away.

She sighed as remembered that she would have been in Brussels today.

Just as she closed the refrigerator, she heard a crash and a muffled curse.

“Stay here, Andy,” Jenna ordered.

She ran to the guest room, where Dustin was on the floor facedown. Turning his head, he looked up at her, then winced in pain. He was wearing only a pair of white boxers.

“Are you okay?” Jenna knelt down on the floor next to him. She touched his shoulder and ran her hand over his arm. His skin was tanned and warm to her touch, his body tight and muscled. “Anything broken?”

“I’m fine,” he said quickly. “Just feeling foolish. I tripped.”

“Let me help you up, Dustin,” Jenna said. “I don’t see how you can do it alone.”

Dustin shook his head. “Thanks, but there’s no way you can lift me. I’m too heavy. Just get that chair over by the desk and hold it still. I’ll use that as leverage.”

She held the chair in place and watched as Dustin slowly raised

himself up from the floor, dragging his cast. She couldn't help noticing the play of arm, shoulder and back muscles as he pivoted onto the bed, tired.

"Let me cover you up," she said.

"Thanks," he said, avoiding her gaze.

"Maybe you'll let me help you more, Dustin. You could have seriously injured yourself."

"I'm fine."

"Blockhead," she muttered under her breath.

"What's that?"

"*Blanket*. I'll get you a blanket."

She found a brightly striped serape and covered Dustin with it, averting her eyes from his too-perfect body and noticing the circles under his eyes instead.

"Are you willing to admit now that you need my help?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Nope."

She shook her head. "You stubborn ... um ... ah ... *bull rider*."

"Aww ... such praise." His eyes were half-shuttered, but she could still see the twinkling blue hue. "You're the best, Jenna. I mean it."

She'd waited years to hear him say that.

"Close those blue eyes, cowboy. We'll talk later."

"Can't wait to catch up. I want to know what you've been doing. I want ... to know ... all about you."

He was out. Sleeping. And she was walking on sunshine.

Maybe Dustin wasn't Mr. Right. But he might be Mr. Right Now.

So what was she going to do about it?

Chapter Two

As Dustin slept, Jenna spent the afternoon helping Andy with his reading. He was making painfully slow progress, but it was progress just the same. They still had a lot of work to do yet.

“Sound out the word, Andy,” she advised. “You’d know the word if you broke it down to smaller words or sounds.”

“Cot ... ton ... wood,” he said slowly.

“It’s a tree,” Dustin said from the doorway.

He was hanging over his crutches and looked more than a little ruffled.

“Hey, Uncle Dustin!” Andy said, his cute little face brimming with happiness. “Did you have a good sleep? Aunt Jenna said that it’s important, that you’ll get better faster.”

“That’s just what my doctor said, buckaroo.” He smiled at Andy, then turned to Jenna. “I didn’t mean to disturb your lesson.”

Andy answered instead. “You didn’t.” He slid his chair away from the kitchen table and looked hopefully at his aunt.

“Can I go now?”

“Finish the paragraph first,” Jenna said.

He pulled his chair back and glanced at the page. “The cotton-wood tree is found in North America and can live many, many years.”

Dustin cleared his throat. “The cottonwood tree is a good,

sturdy tree, Andy. We had one on my father's ranch, and he found out that it's been around for four hundred years." He paused. "That's almost as old as your father."

Andy giggled until Jenna thought he was going to fall out of the chair. Then Dustin pointed to the reading workbook and Andy sobered.

"The cottonwood tree is found in North America and can live many, many years," Andy read once again, then turned to her. "Just like Uncle Dustin said."

"I think we can stop for today, Andy," she said with a sigh.

Dustin put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I saw a basketball hoop hanging from the barn wall. What do you say we shoot some hoops?"

"Awesome!" Andy replied.

"You're going to have to spot me some points," Dustin said.

"Don't do it, Andy," advised Jenna. "Dustin was an awesome basketball player in high school, and an awesome quarterback, besides being a champion rodeo rider."

Dustin raised an eyebrow and looked at her strangely. "So, you remember that much about me from high school?"

"Well, you were Tom's best friend. He always talked about you. Besides, I went to the games. I saw you play." Absolutely she remembered him. Who wouldn't? He'd always been the perfect jock.

Dustin's eyes twinkled and a smile lit his face. He seemed ... pleased by her answer.

Then he winked at Jenna, and her mouth went dry. Darn it. One wink from him in her freshman year of high school would have provided her with four years' worth of joy. But they weren't in high school anymore—and she'd have to remember that.

“I want ten points,” Andy insisted.

“I'll spot you ten points only, and that's highway robbery,” Dustin protested good-naturedly, continuing the banter.

Jenna knew that the big, lanky cowboy would give Andy anything that he wanted. She knew Dustin's generosity from talking to Tom, and it never failed to tweak her when it came to the boy's birthday, just a bit.

It seemed like Dustin always knew the perfect gifts for a growing boy—a dirt bike, a basketball, a bat and glove—whereas she saw to it that he had a supply of nice clothes for school and books befitting his age.

Of course, Andy's excitement and thankful hugs would be for the fun things, rather than the practical, so Jenna was grudgingly glad that Dustin's gifts made Andy happy. Sure, she could have given him toys and such, but he was growing so fast, and needed clothes. Besides, she always felt the need to be his stand-in mother in the place of the ever-unhappy and lethargic Marla who'd *think* about shopping for Andy when school was well underway.

As she put together a lasagna for dinner, she could hear the easy dialogue between Dustin and Andy through the open window.

“You shoot like a girl,” Andy said.

“I’m on crutches, for Pete’s sake.”

“I want twenty points from you. Twenty. Even though you shoot like a girl, you still can shoot,” Andy said.

“No way, kiddo. We settled for ten.”

“Hey, we didn’t shake on it.”

And on and on it went. Jenna slipped the lasagna into the refrigerator and went outside to join them.

“Want to play, Jenna?” Dustin asked when he saw her approach.

“I was just going to watch.”

“C’mon and play along with us. You can be on my team,” Dustin said.

“That’s not fair,” Andy whined.

“What if I give you twenty points?” Dustin asked.

“Thirty.”

“Done.”

Dustin tossed Jenna the ball. She took a shot. Perfect!

“Beginner’s luck,” she said with a grin. And it *was* beginner’s luck. She wasn’t much of a jock.

Ironically, as she started making the occasional basket, Dustin began to miss shot after shot. Unless he was letting Andy win.

How sweet of him.

But, she thought wryly, she didn’t have to *let* Andy win. She wasn’t that great a player, and most of her shots bounced off the rim.

Despite their good-natured fun, she was all-too aware when Dustin took off his shirt and she saw more proof of his strength.

Suddenly, she felt hot, breathless and shocked at her reaction to him. Mercifully, she'd thought to bring out three bottles of water. She grabbed one and took a long draw, desperate to cool herself and calm her racing pulse.

"Break," she yelled, pushing her bangs off her forehead. She handed both of them a bottle of water. "Dustin needs to rest for a while."

Dustin smiled his thanks, gingerly lowered himself onto a bench and took a long drink. Jenna could see his strong neck move as he swallowed.

She took another sip of water. Darn, it was getting hot out here ...

Andy cupped his hands around his mouth. "Time's up!"

Dustin stood up with difficulty. When he got the ball, he passed it to Jenna. She aimed and made the basket.

They gave each other a high five, but then Dustin's fingers curled briefly around hers and an undeniable jolt shot through her body. It was nothing, she told herself.

She was overreacting.

Admittedly, she didn't have much experience with men. She'd been a wallflower in high school, and her current lifestyle didn't allow her much free time to meet anyone. That's why her trip to Europe had meant so much. She'd needed that vacation for more than one reason.

Not only was it going to be a well-deserved vacation, but it would give her the opportunity to meet men.

For someone about to turn thirty, she hadn't dated much at all. In fact, Jenna could count her dates on one hand—none of which resulted in a serious relationship.

As someone who wanted to get married and have a family, in that old-fashioned order, she hadn't exactly had the time or the opportunity to meet many men.

But now she and Dustin were living together, so to speak, and she had the perfect opportunity to find out if she liked him as much as she'd always thought—and heaven knew she'd thought about him a lot throughout the years.

And she certainly wasn't going to think twice about her brother's silly command to stay away from Dustin, issued after her parents died when she was in her teens. Now, she could truthfully say they were acquaintances who only spoke when Tom was there to chaperone, come to think of it.

Dustin's reputation and occupation spoke of experience with women. He'd always been a player, whereas she hadn't even been in the game.

But she could change that. She remembered a magazine that she'd bought and stuck in her suitcase. It had advertised a specific article about how to catch a man and keep him.

Now, where did she put that magazine?

Dustin pretended to drop the ball, letting Andy retrieve it.

But his mind wasn't on basketball. It was on Jenna and the

increasingly obvious attraction between them. She'd ignored him in high school, but surprisingly, she was being nice now. And she'd changed so much. She seemed more relaxed and less stressed. He'd never lacked for female companionship, but this one girl from his past still had a hold on him—and she was the only one he could never have.

He couldn't understand why he was noticing everything about her: the way her blond hair glinted in the desert sun. How her tank top lifted just an inch or so, showing a tanned, taut midriff whenever she threw the basketball. How her whole face lit up when she smiled.

Normally it might not be much of a challenge to use their close quarters as an opportunity to finally get her into bed, but she was Tom's baby sister—and she was definitely off-limits. Even though they were the same age, that didn't matter. She'd always be his best friend's younger sister.

But he'd made his promise long ago. Maybe Tom had forgotten his edict by now. He must have, or else why would Tom push him toward recovering at the Bar R when he knew that Jenna would be there?

Dustin remembered back in high school when he'd told Tom that he wanted to date Jenna. Tom had squashed the idea in a hurry.

“Forget it,” Tom had said. “Jenna is something special—she's not just another cheerleader. Keep your hands off her. Promise me.”

Dustin hoped that everything was cool with Tom. He knew that if he became involved with Jenna—even after all these years—it would be the end of his friendship with Tom.

He couldn't blame Tom—after all, aside from Andy, Jenna was his only family.

It wasn't worth risking Tom's displeasure by dating Jenna, especially when they weren't just friends, but business partners as well. They co-owned several rank bulls and broncs here on the Bar R.

He tried to concentrate on the game, but he missed his shot, and this time it wasn't on purpose. Jenna was just too distracting.

Just then, she tripped on one of his crutches and fell into him. They both toppled into a heap on the blacktop.

“Are you okay, Jenna?” he asked after they both caught their breaths. He slipped a hand under her head to protect it from the hard surface.

“I'm fine. Just feeling a little clumsy.”

“These crutches ...” he began. “It's my fault.”

He continued to look into her eyes, her big, brilliant green eyes. It wouldn't take much to close the distance between them and taste her full lips.

Something nagged at him, but he pushed it to the back of his mind. All he wanted to savor right now was the unbelievable feeling of holding Jenna in his arms.

“I'm so sorry!” she gasped, leaping to her feet all too soon. “Oh, Dustin! Did I hurt you?”

Actually, it was a little bit of heaven. Her scent, her body close to his, her weight pressing on him. Nice. He didn't give a hoot about the pain that throbbed around his ankle. "I'll live."

"That's the second time you've been on the ground today. You must be—"

"I'm fine," he said. But he wasn't. He had parts that were killing him, and he didn't mean the parts that were in the cast.

"Let me help you," she said, brow furrowed in concern.

"Just hold on to my crutches, and I'll use them to pull myself up."

He did, but it took him four tries.

"Nice job, Andy." He shook the boy's hand, then hobbled over to the porch, and slumped into one of the rocking chairs. Looking down at the jeans he'd cut up to pull over his cast, he decided to get his mind off Jenna and think of something else.

Like his lack of clothes.

"Jenna, I'm going to get a ranch hand to give me a ride to my apartment so I can pick up some clothes and things."

"I'd be glad to drive you to Tubac," she said, taking a sip of water. "I don't mind at all. Besides, Andy and I could both use a change of scenery. How about tomorrow morning?"

Dustin sighed. So much for trying to stay away from her. Still, there was no polite way to refuse. "I'm meeting with the ranch hands at the bunkhouse first thing in the morning. It shouldn't take long. I just want to have a better handle on the workings of Tom's ranch."

“We can go after your meeting,” she said.

“That would be great. Thanks.”

He was looking forward to the meeting, and as much as it killed him to impose, the ride with Jenna and Andy would give him something else to look forward to in the morning ...

The desert morning dawned hot and bright. Dustin washed his hair in the sink and the rest of him as best he could, vowing to rig up something so he could take a shower or a bath. He could already hear Jenna and Andy in the kitchen. The smell of coffee and something cooking, pancakes maybe, drifted in the air, making his stomach growl.

He could get used to this.

It was all so ... homey.

He thought of all the buckle bunnies who hung around the rodeos. They were usually heavily made up and wore low-cut and tight-fitting clothes. Jenna wasn't like them at all. With her no-frills beauty and modest clothes, Jenna was more attractive than any woman he'd met on the circuit.

He could get used to this, if he didn't have other, more immediate goals. He needed to get back to riding bulls and win the PBR Finals in Vegas. That was his plan. Not giving in to a flirtation that could only lead to trouble.

Dustin lumbered into the kitchen and took a big whiff. He hadn't had a good breakfast since ... well, it had been a while.

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