



Silhouette ROMANCE®

1453

June

NEVER LET YOU GO

Judy Christenberry



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Never Let You Go

«HarperCollins»

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JED KNEW MEN AND HORSES. AND HE UNDERSTOOD A LITTLE ABOUT WOMEN. But born illegitimate, a lifelong loner, what the cowboy didn't understand—would probably never understand—was families. Which meant that the attraction he felt for rich, pretty rancher Beth Kennedy was just that. Attraction. Nothing more. There was no future in it—no house with flowers, no cradles filled with sweet-smelling babies. So Jed vowed he'd train Beth to be the best rodeo rider she could be. Then he'd move on down the road. Alone. Unless he'd just found a place to call home....

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“You could take me to the dance.”

Jed frowned ferociously, as if her words were a surprise. “I don’t mix business and pleasure.”

Beth wanted to ask him which he considered her to be, but she didn’t. She wouldn’t like the answer. “Since we both know you’d only be doing it to protect my reputation, I don’t think it would hurt.” No need to mention she’d faced these kinds of situations before without a date.

He rubbed the back of his neck, then looked at her again. “I suppose I could, as long as you understand there’s nothing personal.”

There was something personal, all right, Beth thought. Jed just didn’t know it. Yet.



An unexpected inheritance changed their lives...

but would love be their ultimate reward?

NEVER LET YOU GO

(Silhouette Romance #1453)

THE BORROWED GROOM

(Silhouette Romance #1457)

CHERISH THE BOSS

(Silhouette Romance #1463)

Dear Reader,

From the enchantment of first loves to the wonder of second chances, Silhouette Romance demonstrates the power of genuine emotion. This month we continue our yearlong twentieth anniversary celebration with another stellar lineup, including the return of beloved author Dixie Browning with Cinderella’s Midnight Kiss.

Next, Raye Morgan delivers a charming marriage-of-convenience story about a secretary who is Promoted—To Wife! And Silhouette Romance begins a new theme-based promotion, AN OLDER MAN, which highlights stories featuring sophisticated older men who meet their matches in younger, inexperienced women. Our premiere title is Professor and the Nanny by reader favorite Phyllis Halldorson.

Bestselling author Judy Christenberry unveils her new miniseries, THE CIRCLE K SISTERS, in Never Let You Go. When a millionaire businessman wins an executive assistant at an auction, he discovers that he wants her to be Contractually His... forever. Don’t miss this conclusion of Myrna Mackenzie’s THE WEDDING AUCTION series. And in Karen Rose Smith’s Just the Husband She Chose, a powerful attorney is reunited in a marriage meant to satisfy a will.

In coming months, look for new miniseries by some of your favorite authors. It’s an exciting year for Silhouette Books, and we invite you to join the celebration!

Happy reading!



Mary-Theresa Hussey
Senior Editor

Never Let You Go

Judy Christenberry



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Books by Judy Christenberry

Silhouette Romance

The Nine-Month Bride #1324

* Marry Me, Kate #1343

* Baby in Her Arms #1350

* A Ring for Cinderella #1356

† Never Let You Go #1453

JUDY CHRISTENBERRY

has been writing romances for fifteen years because she loves happy endings as much as her readers do. She's a bestselling writer for Harlequin American Romance, but she has a long love of traditional romances and is delighted to tell a story that brings those elements to the reader. Judy quit teaching French recently and devotes her time to writing. She hopes readers have as much fun reading her stories as she does writing them. She spends her spare time reading, watching her favorite sports teams and keeping track of her two daughters. Judy's a native Texan, but has been temporarily transplanted to Arizona.

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Chapter One

“Where have you been?” Abby Kennedy asked her sister Beth, meeting her at the door. “You said you’d be back over an hour ago.”

A frown on her forehead, Beth moved into the living room. “Flat tire,” she said succinctly. The Circle K ranch, their home, was in the lower panhandle of Texas, an hour from the city of Wichita Falls. Tumbleweed, twenty miles away, was the nearest town where she could get a tire fixed. “Did anyone come to see me?”

Jedadiah Davis stood in the shadows of the living room, staring at the beautiful young woman who’d finally returned, after he’d waited for more than an hour.

He should have been prepared for her beauty. After all, her sisters, Abby and Melissa, were both lookers. But something about Elizabeth Kennedy grabbed at him more than both of her sisters put together. Bad sign.

Besides, he wasn’t sure he was interested in a rich lady for a client. He’d agreed to meet with her, but he hadn’t made any promises. Word had gotten out that these ladies were wealthy. He’d given the missing sister the benefit of the doubt, but after waiting for an hour, he was fed up.

Fed up, or scared to death of getting close to her, his inner voice teased. She was young, fresh, rich and beautiful. What did she want with barrel racing? She didn’t need that particular spotlight to be noticed.

“Mr. Davis is here. He said he had an appointment,” Abby said, gesturing in his direction.

Beth stepped forward, her gaze landing on him in the shadows. An inexplicable look of relief crossed her face and she walked towards him, her hand extended.

He’d been ready to leave for the past half hour, but the sisters had kept him talking, their polite manners making his exit impossible. Now he was tempted to stride out of the room without excusing his poor behavior.

“Hello,” Beth said. “I apologize. I didn’t see you after the glare of the sun from outside. I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

She stopped as he shook her hand, her face flushed and her eyes widened in surprise.

He wished his reaction had been that simple. At least he hoped he hid the surge of desire that hit him, the approval he felt as he realized her hands were callused, hard, the sign of a worker.

“I wanted to talk to you about training me to be a barrel racer,” she said. She hooked her thumbs in the back pockets of her jeans. One light brown eyebrow slid up. “I understand you’re the best.”

He recognized a challenge when he heard one. He tightened his features, hoping for impassiveness. “Yeah. The best.”

“Well, you certainly don’t lack in self-confidence,” she chided, her chin rising slightly even as she smiled.

He kept his answer succinct. After all, he wasn’t being hired for conversation. “Nope.”

“I assume you have references. I’ve read some interviews, but I haven’t heard who you’ve worked with lately.”

“I trained two of the last three world champions. You can call Sherry Duncan and Lisa McDonald,” he said, naming his two latest pupils. He wasn’t used to having his credentials questioned, but he didn’t blame the young woman for asking. No, that wasn’t the problem.

But there was a problem. Or maybe several.

“Look, Miss Kennedy, I think there’s been a mistake,” he said, avoiding her gaze. “I’ll be on my way.”

“Wait!” He heard Beth call as he turned his back on her, not bothering to shake hands with her. He didn’t want to touch her again. The last time had unsettled him for some strange reason.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“On down the road. I have others interested in my services.”

“I haven’t said I’m not interested,” she reminded him.

“You’re not the only one to make the decision, lady. I don’t work where I’m not wanted.” He opened the door and walked out to his beat-up pickup, ignoring the whispering going on between the sisters.

Hearing footsteps behind him, he hoped it was Abby, the sensible older sister. But the tingling on the nape of his neck told him it was Beth.

Soft name. Feminine. Trouble.

“Mr. Davis, could we talk a minute?”

“Nothing to talk about,” he muttered. All his instincts were yelling for him to get the hell out of there before she persuaded him to stay.

He slid behind the wheel and closed the door, but the window was down, since it was October, and she put her hand on the opening.

“What’s your hurry?”

“I’ve been waiting over an hour for you to get your rear in gear, lady. I don’t like to waste time.” He kept staring straight ahead. He’d already noted her hazel eyes, the dash of freckles across her nose, the full lips that started a hunger in him that was dangerous.

Hell, she was too young for him to be thinking those thoughts. He was only thirty-two but he felt years older in comparison to her fresh beauty.

“I didn’t have a flat tire on purpose.”

“Doesn’t take that long to fix a flat tire. Unless you’re sitting helpless-like alongside the road waiting for Prince Charming.” He figured even then someone would happen along pretty quick for a woman like Beth Kennedy.

She flushed and looked away. “I didn’t have a spare,” she muttered.

“What did you do?”

“I had to walk to a neighbor’s house and call the garage in town and have them bring one out to me.” Now she looked him in the eye. “I should’ve called here to warn you I’d be late. I apologize.”

“No problem,” he said, and cranked the engine in his truck.

“So I apologized. Why are you leaving?”

“I don’t work with anyone who won’t give one hundred percent.”

Both of those pretty brows rose, almost disappearing in her soft bangs. “Who said I wouldn’t?”

“You have to be hungry to make it in rodeo. You’re not hungry.”

“Oh, yes I am.”

“How could you be? Your next meal doesn’t depend on how well you race.”

She studied him, which made him all the more uneasy. He knew some women were attracted to him. He’d had too many offers to deny the truth of it. But he was untrained in social skills.

“Does your next meal depend on your job?” she asked casually. But he saw the intelligence in her eyes. More trouble.

He shrugged. “Not my next one, but eventually I’d run out. It did once.”

“Mine did once, too. Not now, as you’ve obviously heard. But it’s not food that drives me. And I think it’s not food that drives you. That doesn’t make me any less hungry. Does it you?”

Damn, why didn’t she back off? He couldn’t be anything but honest. “Nope.”

“So, we have something in common.”

“I charge a hefty fee.” He was searching for reasons to leave. He should have known money wouldn’t be one of them. But he’d try. He doubled his fee, watching her face as he named it.

“My, my, you are proud of your work, aren’t you?”

The urge to justify that amount, to tell her just how good he was, surged through him, but he held it in check. “Yeah.”

“Okay.”

He stared at her, not sure what her single word meant. And irritated that she could be even more succinct than he was.

“Okay, what?”

“I’m agreeing to your price. I’m assuming that’s in addition to room and board. Anything else?”

“Yeah. If I take on any other training jobs, I’ll need stable space for the animals. I’ll pay for the extra feed, of course.”

“I’ll have to check with Abby on that. She runs the ranch. But I think it’ll be okay. When can you start?”

What the hell was he doing? He’d had every intention of driving down that long, dusty driveway and never looking back. Now he was practically moved in.

“Wait a minute. I haven’t seen you ride.”

“So we’ll try it for a week or two and then reevaluate. If you don’t think I’m worth your time, you move on. Or if I don’t like the way you work, you move on. If we’re both satisfied, we keep going.” She was watching him closely. When he didn’t respond, she repeated her earlier question.

“When can you start?”

“Uh, in the morning?”

“Right. It’ll take about an hour to fix up a room in the bunkhouse. You’ll take your meals at the house with us. The stable has a couple of empty stalls,” she said, gesturing to the two-horse trailer he had hitched to his truck. “Want some help settling your horses?”

“No! I handle my animals. No one else touches them. Got that?”

“Got it. And I hope you take lots of sugar in your coffee,” she returned.

He knew he was going to regret asking, but he couldn’t help himself. “Why?”

“Cause you need to sweeten up. Otherwise, everything around you is going to go sour,” she snapped, stepping back from the truck.

“Maybe I need something more than sugar,” he retorted, determined to make her back down. “What do you say to that?”

“That you’re out of luck unless you want to visit town and fork over some cash. That’s none of my business as long as you do your job.” Her chin was rising again, a sign he’d already figured out meant she was digging in her toes.

“I’ll do my job, lady. You just see if you can stand the pace.” He glared at her, but she said nothing else, simply giving him a careless salute and walking toward the house.

He watched the sway of her rear in those tight jeans and was afraid he might drool. Visiting town for some female companionship might be a necessity if he hung around Beth Kennedy for any period of time.

Damn, he’d gotten himself into a mess.

Beth could feel his glare on her. She hoped her trembling legs didn’t show beneath her jeans. What had she gotten herself into?

She wanted to be a barrel racer. The best barrel racer in the world. She’d heard of Jedadiah Davis, read about him. She couldn’t wait to have met him.

Of course, she should have called, but she’d thought she could get home quicker than she had. And she hadn’t wanted to tell her sisters what she was up to.

She should have known he’d be offended by his wait. He was so full of himself—okay, so maybe he had a right to be self-confident. He was the best.

And the handsomest.

She hadn’t expected his rugged good looks. Those piercing blue eyes seemed to read every thought in her head. But that must not be true, or he would have known he’d rocked her almost from the beginning.

Abby was anxiously waiting when she reached the house, taking Beth’s thoughts away from her reaction to the man.

“Well? Are you going to train with Mr. Davis?”

“He’s staying. I’ve got to clean out one of the unused rooms in the bunkhouse.”

“I’ll help,” Melissa, the middle Kennedy sister, said from the doorway. “I’ve been intending to work on those rooms anyway.” Since their visit to the lawyer’s office a month ago, after their Aunt Beulah’s death, learning of their inheritance, Melissa had been redoing the house, making it more efficient and more beautiful.

“Thanks, Missy,” Beth returned, using her childhood name for Melissa. “Do you have time?”

“Yeah. Dinner’s already in the oven for tonight, and I baked a cake this morning.”

“Once he has one of your meals, Mr. Davis will never leave,” Abby teased. “Did you negotiate a fee?” she asked her youngest sister.

“Yeah, and it’s a good thing I inherited a lot of money.” She told Abby the fee he demanded. “That’s twice what I heard he charges, but he’s well worth it. He probably doubled it because he doesn’t think I have any talent,” Beth muttered. “Or because he didn’t like me.”

“Why wouldn’t he like you?” Melissa demanded to know, her hands on her hips. She was always the first to defend her sisters.

Abby chuckled. “Probably because she’s hardheaded and demanding, Melissa.”

“She’s determined,” Melissa corrected, “and charming.”

Both her sisters almost doubled over in laughter.

“I swear, Missy, you’d say the Grinch was misunderstood,” Beth said, hugging her sister.

“And she’d convince the rest of us,” Abby added.

“Oh, you two,” Melissa protested. “But I’m glad the man’s going to take you on. He really is the best.”

“Yeah, I know,” Beth agreed. “Thank you both for letting me try this. I know it’ll make us a little short-handed on the ranch.”

“We’ll manage,” Abby assured her. When they discovered their inheritance, all three had vowed to pursue their dreams, but actually doing so wasn’t easy. “But why did a flat take so long?”

“I didn’t get the spare fixed six months ago when I had the last flat.”

“Aunt Beulah always said you should pay attention to details,” Abby reminded her.

“Yeah,” Beth agreed with a sigh. “I think Jed Davis will be saying the same thing.”

Beth gathered up clean sheets, a broom, a mop and bucket, and lots of cleaning supplies. Melissa followed her with a pillow, blanket and a set of towels. Only two men occupied the bunkhouse right now, though Abby was looking for new hands.

Barney had been on the ranch long before the girls had come to live there when their parents died fifteen years ago. He’d had a casual male influence on their lives, but mostly, he’d been a friend. Beth had learned from Barney to whittle in rare moments of leisure. She trusted him.

The other cowhand, Dirk, kept to himself. He’d been on the ranch a little over two years, but he had forty years’ experience on the range. He might not be overly friendly, but he worked hard.

Now Jedadiah Davis would become a part of their lives. As she made the bed, Beth couldn’t help wondering if he’d stay long enough to get to know them, or move on, still a stranger.

A shiver passed through her. Something about the man bothered her. She believed his reputation, so there were no doubts there. But when he’d shaken her hand, she’d wanted to snatch it back, to retreat.

One look into his piercing blue eyes and she’d felt exposed, unable to hide. And then there was his response to her comments about sugar.

She hoped the man didn’t think there were any extracurricular benefits to training her. You wish, her inner voice taunted.

Grinning ruefully, she admitted he was attractive. Her social life, in the face of Beulah’s need of their help, had suffered. She didn’t know much about men in that area. Her one attempt to gain some experience had been a disaster.

Fortunately, the man had moved on, leaving her at home to lick her wounds, never having to see him again. She sure wouldn't want to ruin her training with any...messiness.

"I can do that."

The deep burr of a voice didn't need identifying. She snapped straight up from her bent position over his bed. Spinning around, she put her hands on her hips, hoping to look composed.

"No problem. We've just finished. That is, Melissa helped me, but she went back to the house to check on dinner." She scooped the towels up from the one chair in the little room. "Here's a set of towels. Toss the dirty ones over in that laundry basket. We pick up the dirty clothes every couple of days and return them washed the next day."

"I'll take care of my own laundry," he growled.

"Suit yourself, but if you're picturing me bent over a washtub, don't. We have good equipment and share the work." She didn't add that the new washing machine and dryer had arrived only a couple of weeks ago.

He nodded but said nothing else, just staring at her.

"Well, dinner will be at six. The other two men are Barney and Dirk. Introduce yourself and I'll see you at dinner."

"Did you ask Abby about my training other horses?"

She was glad she'd remembered to ask. They had plenty of space for the man to train horses. In fact, she hoped she might learn something about it. "Yes. She said that's not a problem."

"Good."

He continued to stare at her, not moving out of the doorway. Something warned her not to push past him. It was as if sparks would fly if she touched him.

"Need anything else?" she asked.

"No, I guess not."

"Then, welcome to the Circle K. Hope you like it here." She took a step forward. Still he didn't move.

Her mop, broom and pail were against the wall by the door. She moved to pick them up.

His big hand circled the broom and mop. "Want me to carry these to the house?"

Startled by his offer, she looked into his eyes. Beautiful blue eyes. "No, of course not. I'm no debutante, unable to do for myself."

Her aunt had worked them hard because it had been necessary. Or at least, they'd thought it had. And taught them a lot. But she'd done more than that. She'd given them a home together when Social Services had intended to separate them into three foster homes. She was their uncle's widow, no blood kin, but she'd taken them anyway.

"We'll see what you're made of tomorrow morning," he warned, as if he didn't believe her words.

But Beth wasn't about to show any fear. "You bet you will, cowboy."

Chapter Two

In spite of her brave words, Beth didn't sleep well that night.

After a meal where her stomach rolled every time Jed spoke, which, fortunately, wasn't often, she'd maintained her ground until the man had left the house. Then she'd hidden in her room, poring over the books she'd found on barrel racing. And any information she could find about Jedadiah Davis.

There was little written on Jed's early years. He'd made his mark on the rodeo circuit as a roper. Twice he'd won the national championship. Three other times he'd been in the top five. Then he'd hurt his arm in an auto accident and had turned to training.

And never looked back.

For the past four years, he'd been the man in demand. All the reports said he was a stern taskmaster. But he got results.

If he believed in his pupil.

One moment she was holding her breath, hoping he'd believe in her. The next moment she'd find herself pleading he'd move on down the road, leaving her to find another trainer.

He made her nervous.

When she reached the breakfast table, Abby offered her the entire morning off from ranch work, so she could have plenty of time to give to her training. But Beth couldn't be so selfish. She knew Abby was already shorthanded with Melissa working in the house all day.

"I haven't set up a specific time with Jed, yet. I thought I'd put in three or four hours, then head back to the house. After lunch, I can ride out with you again."

"That won't be enough time for you to get much done," Abby protested.

"Until you find another hand, Abby, I'm going to help."

Abby sighed. "I admit it would make things easier. Even though we finished the roundup, we had to neglect the fences, and we've got to bale the hay, and I'd like to move the larger herd to the south pasture."

"All in one day?" Melissa teased from the stove.

"If it's possible," Abby agreed with a grin.

"Seriously, I can ride out if it'll help," Melissa offered.

Abby and Beth exchanged grins. Though the two of them had taken to the saddle, Melissa, while able to ride, preferred to spend her time in the kitchen.

"We won't ask for that much sacrifice," Abby assured her sister. "Someone will come along looking for a job any day now. You just keep feeding us."

"Yeah, last night's dinner was terrific," Beth added.

"How would you know?" Melissa returned. "You scarcely ate anything." Before Beth could come up with excuses, Melissa said, "Ring the bell for the guys."

Beth stepped to the back porch and banged on the triangle that hung from one rafter. Before the ringing had even stopped, three men emerged from the bunkhouse.

She didn't have any difficulty picking out Jed Davis. His broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped figure topped the other two men by three or four inches. Drawing a deep breath, she waited for them to reach her.

As she'd expected, Jed let the other two go first. Before he could move past her with a nod, she touched his arm. He came to an abrupt halt, his gaze settling on her hand.

She jerked it back.

"Yeah?" he asked warily.

Her prepared speech flew out of her head. "Is it all right if we start about ten?"

"Ten? Is that your idea of an early start?"

The scorn in his voice flailed her—and made her so mad she wouldn't have explained if he'd begged her. Taking on a drawl she'd heard other women affect, she replied, "That's right, sugar. I need to get my nails done before I can get on a horse."

Then she sashayed in front of him into the house.

She figured he'd be packed and gone before noon. And good riddance to him. When she didn't hear footsteps behind her right away, she wondered if he'd even come in for breakfast.

"Where's—" Abby began, but the sound of the back door opening again stopped her question. "There you are, Jed. I thought maybe you'd gotten lost."

"No, ma'am."

Melissa set a platter of scrambled eggs on the table where sausage and bacon already awaited eager hands. Then she pulled two pans of biscuits out of the oven.

Beth picked up the coffeepot and began filling cups, while Abby poured glasses of orange juice. As she carried the glasses to the table, Abby addressed Jed.

"I'm sure Beth explained about the late start this morning. I'm hoping we'll find more men right away, but Beth is still willing to help out before she starts training."

"Help out with what?" he asked, ignoring the plate of eggs Barney was offering him.

Everyone in the kitchen, except Beth, seemed surprised by his question. Abby, after shooting a look at Beth, said, "Whatever needs to be done. We work with Dirk and Barney, like anyone on a ranch."

"All three of you?"

Melissa's cheeks flushed. "Not me. I used to help some days, but I prefer the cooking and housework."

Beth added, "We always felt meals like Melissa turns out are fair trade."

Both hands, seated at the table, stuffing their faces, made grunts of approval.

"I can see why. Your cooking is the best, Miss Melissa." Jed sent Melissa a smile that had Beth's insides quivering with jealousy.

He turned to Abby. "I understand that there's work that has to be done. How can I help?"

"Oh, no!" Abby protested. "Your time's too valuable for—I mean, Beth didn't hire you to do ranch work. We'll manage."

"I'll help," he said decisively, as if it was his decision. "Then maybe I'll get an extra hour with my pupil, if she can work it in."

There was a little sarcasm in those last words, Beth realized. Maybe she deserved it, since she'd given him a smart answer earlier. But he'd made her mad.

His blue gaze settled on her face, as if he expected her to comment.

She took a bite of eggs and chewed as though her life depended on it.

Abby, after looking at her, too, said, "I'm sure we can work that out."

Okay, so he'd jumped to an erroneous conclusion. That didn't mean the lady had to gull him with her response about a manicure. Jed studied her hands from under his lashes as he ate the fine breakfast Melissa Kennedy had prepared.

Beth's nails were short, clean and unpolished. Working hands, as he'd earlier noted. And sexier than any of the red claws he'd seen on women who thought they were all dolled up. But that smart mouth of hers was going to cause trouble.

When he got up from the breakfast table, he carried his dishes to the sink. The other two men stared at him, then hurriedly did the same thing. Melissa rewarded them all with a grateful smile.

"Where do you want me, Miss Abby?" he asked, awaiting instructions from the lady boss.

"Are you any good at fence repairs?" she asked.

With a lopsided grin, he said, "I've ridden more fence lines than you can imagine."

"Great. Why don't you and Beth ride—"

"No!" Beth shrieked.

“No!” Jed said, quieter but just as determined. When Abby stared at him, he added, “I don’t need any help.”

“It will go faster with the two of you, and it will give you a chance to get to know each other. You can finish the fence on the south pasture by mid-morning, before Barney and Dirk get the herd over there.”

“You can’t start baling hay by yourself,” Beth protested. “What if something happens?”

“I’ll take the new cell phone. But I’ve done it before. It’s a boring job, but safe.” Abby stood and stared at the rest of the room. “It’s settled. I’ll see all of you at lunch.” She turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Barney and Dirk shuffled out the back door. Jed stared at Beth. When she still sat at the table, her lips pressed tightly together, he prodded, “Are you waiting for your manicure? Or are you going to lead the way to the south pasture?”

“Manicure?” Melissa questioned.

“He’s teasing me, Missy. Don’t worry about it.” Beth stood and glared at him. “You got gloves?”

“Yeah. They’re at the bunkhouse.”

“Go get them and I’ll meet you at the barn.”

Beth breathed a sigh of relief when Jed left the house.

“Are you sure the two of you are going to get along?” Melissa asked.

“No.” Beth tried to paste a smile on her face, knowing her single answer reeked of despair. “I can’t seem to help putting up his back, Missy. I don’t intend to, but he made me so mad—”

“When?”

“Out on the porch, before breakfast. I was going to explain, truly, but I blurted out that we’d start at ten and he assumed I was going to go back to bed or something. So I told him we couldn’t start earlier because I had to get a manicure.”

Melissa laughed. “You’ve never had a manicure. I tried to paint your nails once, and you screamed as if I were torturing you.”

“Do you think you have to remind me? It was a silly answer, but it was the most decadent thing I could think of.”

“Well,” Melissa began, putting an arm around Beth’s shoulders, “I think you might need to do some fence-mending of your own, in addition to the real fences, while you’re out there with him this morning.”

“Yeah,” Beth agreed glumly, and went to fetch her hat and gloves.

Outside the barn, she selected two horses, one a sturdy, rawboned roan that could easily carry Jed’s big body. For herself, she chose a part Appaloosa mare she’d named Snowdrop. After putting bridles on them, she tied them to the corral fence and went into the barn to fetch the rest of the gear.

Much to her surprise, she almost ran into Jed in the shadowy interior. He was saddling one of his horses.

“You don’t need to ride him. I’ve got a horse in the corral for you.”

“I always ride my own horses.” His no-nonsense response irritated her again.

Taking a deep breath, she said calmly, “It’s your choice. Me, I wouldn’t work my horse after traveling with him, unless I had to.”

Without waiting for a response, she moved on to the tack room. Lifting down her saddle and the blan ket that went with it, she turned around to discover Jed standing in the doorway.

“You’ve got a point,” he said, though she heard the reluctance in his voice. “Okay if I use my own gear?”

“Of course.” She wasn’t about to let him see that she enjoyed his capitulation. He followed her back into the autumn sunshine and she indicated the roan.

“That’s Buster. He’s no racehorse, but he has a steady gait and he’s dependable.”

“Thanks.”

After throwing the blanket on Snowdrop, she put the saddle in place, then began buckling and cinching.

“You do that like you were born to it,” Jed offered after watching her.

“I was nine when we came here to live. Aunt Beulah didn’t waste any time teaching us about ranch life. And she didn’t suffer fools gladly.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jed returned, saddling Buster.

Beth almost burst into laughter. If he’d tried, he couldn’t have come closer to the dry retorts that had punctuated Beulah’s long silences.

It had taken the girls several years to realize what a softy Beulah was beneath that stern exterior. But she wasn’t one to wear her feelings on her sleeve. And she didn’t believe in spoiling children. They received practical gifts on their birthdays. And warm hugs.

That same behavior was repeated at Christmas.

Though she wasn’t effusive, Beulah made them feel welcome. She fed them, clothed them, and made sure they attended school. And most important of all, she made it possible for them to stay together.

So Beth gave no response to Jed’s comment, other than to give him a sunny smile that seemed to surprise him. And that surprise alone was enough to keep her cheerful for a while.

They’d been riding for an hour. Not in companionable silence, but at least they hadn’t had an argument. Finally Jed decided he should make use of their time together.

“Tell me why you want to barrel race.”

She seemed startled by his question.

He waited, giving her a few minutes to pull herself together.

“It’s the main event open to women.”

“Others are opening up. There’s a small circuit only for cowgirls here in Texas.”

She nodded. “When I first thought of it, I wanted to ride because of the money. It seemed we never had enough. Melissa was dreaming of a dishwasher. Abby talked about wanting to increase our irrigation system. Aunt Beulah didn’t ever indulge herself. I wanted—I wanted a lot of things.” With a sigh, she sent him another smile. “I saw myself in the role of triumphant savior.”

“And now?”

“Now, Aunt Beulah is dead, and, much to our surprise, the three of us have a lot of money. Aunt Beulah had put away oil money from earlier years that we didn’t know about. But I want to prove myself, to be the best at something. Melissa, well, you’ve eaten her cooking. She’s a natural-born nester, willing to mother the world. And Abby, she’s an expert on ranching. After working hard all day, she spends her evening reading the ranching magazines, even textbooks on grazing, breeding.”

He didn’t want to hear this. He’d be a lot better off if he could keep believing she was weak, lazy, selfish, vain. All those things he’d assumed before he’d met her.

All those things she’d disproved every minute he spent with her. She was beautiful, but seemed unaware of it. A hard worker, but took it for granted. Concerned for her sisters, but seemed not to worry about herself.

“So you decided to take up barrel racing?”

She sent him an impish grin that had his heart beating faster. Didn’t she know how much he was affected by her lips? Or her tight body, moving with the rhythm of her horse?

“Well, I happen to like riding fast.”

“And winning?”

“That, too,” she added, her smile widening.

“And satin shirts?”

“If I admit to that, are you going to condemn me?” she asked, her expression now wary.

He looked away as he shook his head no.

“You see, Beulah didn’t think clothes were very important. And I was the youngest, so I never got anything new. Abby and Melissa wore them first.” Then she shook her head. “That’s not true. Occasionally, they were too hard on the clothes and they’d be worn out by the time Melissa had finished with them. I’ll never forget the one time I got a new pair of jeans.” This time she beamed at him, and he groaned under his breath. He had to stop hearing these confidences before he swept her into his arms and promised her anything her heart desired.

A peal of laughter surprised him. He looked at her again.

“I was so proud of my new jeans, I insisted on wearing them while we were riding fence line. And I ripped one leg into shreds on a barbed wire fence.”

“Why was that so funny?”

She chuckled again. “Oh, it’s hard to explain. I was afraid to face Aunt Beulah, but she just told me to take them off, and she spent the rest of the evening sewing them up again.”

“She sounds like a fine lady,” he said, still not understanding her laughter.

“Sometimes you remind me of her.”

Her quiet words startled him more than her laughter. “What do you mean? I can’t sew a lick.”

She laughed again. “I didn’t figure you could.”

He glared at her, his only defense, and kicked Buster in the sides to speed up. They’d only found one break so far. No sense in wasting time talking.

They finished the south fence line in a little over three hours. Jed was nothing if not efficient. He’d started out trying to keep Beth from helping.

She ignored his tactics and pitched in.

By the third break, he still barked orders, but he included her in the work. When she’d said he reminded her of Aunt Beulah, she’d meant his gruff exterior, but she already suspected underneath was a man with a heart of gold.

When they reached the corral, he took care of his own horse, leaving her to deal with Snowdrop. Just the way she wanted it.

“What horse are you planning to train?” he asked, his back to her.

“I don’t know.”

He turned to frown at her. “You don’t know?”

“I thought it would be best to wait until I found a trainer and got his opinion about a horse. I love Snowdrop, but she doesn’t have the speed I’ll need.”

He just stared at her.

“Any suggestions? Do you know of a good horse? Price isn’t a problem.”

“Damn, woman, you’re giving me carte blanche to rip you off. Don’t do that.” He turned his back to her again.

She grinned. Did he think she was no judge of men? She might not know how to handle a man romantically, but she’d learned from Aunt Beulah how to judge a man’s character. And even if he didn’t like her, Jed Davis was a man to be trusted.

“So you want me to pick a horse on my own?”

He’d just reached up to lift the saddle off Buster, but instead, he rested his hands on the saddle and bowed his head until his Stetson was almost resting on the leather. Then he gave a gusty sigh, as if she was too much to bear.

“There’s this pretty little sorrel on the next ranch. We’d look good together, but I don’t think she has the cutting ability we’d need. Or Bill Garland has several horses he’s been trying to sell me,” she continued, wondering how long he’d maintain his silence. “Of course, Aunt Beulah wouldn’t ever buy a horse from him. She called him a shyster.”

“I know a horse.” His terse words stopped her.

“You do?”

“About an hour’s drive from here, just into the Oklahoma panhandle. It’ll cost you a pretty penny.”

“Okay.”

He dragged his saddle and blanket off Buster and stalked into the stable. She took her saddle and followed him.

“So, when can we go see him?”

“I’ll go pick him up. I can get a better price without you there.” He never looked at her.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No. I won’t agree to the purchase unless I get to see the animal first.”

“The minute Joe knows the horse is for you, the price will be over the moon. You’ll just have to trust me on this. I’m going alone.”

“No.”

Jed dumped his saddle on the stable wall where one of his horses was penned. Then he turned around to stare at her, his hands riding his hips and a fierce look on his face. “Lady, when I train someone, I’m in charge. I make the decisions.”

“Mister, when I’m buying a horse, I get to take a look before I put down my money.” She put her hands on her hips and glared back.

“I knew this wasn’t going to work,” he muttered. “I’ll pack up and be out of here in an hour.”

He turned his back again and Beth felt her heartbeat racing. She didn’t want him to go. Because he would be a good teacher, she assured herself. That was the reason.

“Boy, you sure give up easy. It’s a wonder you were successful at all on the rodeo circuit.”

When he spun around and began advancing on her, Beth didn’t hesitate to beat a retreat. Until her back hit the stable door across the aisle and she had nowhere to go.

That didn’t stop Jed Davis from coming after her.

Chapter Three

Jed couldn't believe the woman. She was driving him crazy, with her big eyes, sweet lips and sassy mouth. But starting now, he was going to let her know who was boss. He wouldn't be taking her with him to Oklahoma.

Putting his hands on each side of her, trapping her against the stable door, he said firmly, "Don't you ever dare call me a quitter again."

"I don't guess I'll need to if you don't quit." She sounded real sure of herself, but Jed knew he was making her nervous, because she stuck her trembling fingers into her jean pockets.

"I ought to quit," he muttered, staring into her eyes, fighting the urge to kiss her until she agreed to whatever he wanted.

"But you're not going to?" Her hopeful look reminded him of a puppy that had followed him home a long time ago.

"I guess not. But I'm going to buy this horse without you." At least he could stand his ground there.

"That's not fair, Jed. If I'm going to work with the horse, I have to see him first. We might not get along."

"I wouldn't choose a horse you couldn't work with." He might not know a lot of things, but he knew horses.

"I don't see why I can't go," she continued to argue.

"I'm telling you, Joe will triple the price once he knows who wants it."

"How will he know?"

Jed frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

"Well, are you going to introduce me as Beth Kennedy, wealthy woman, looking to be parted from her money?" She gave him a winsome smile, as if she'd made a joke.

"Hell, no. Why would I do that?"

"Then how will he know who I am?"

Figuring he was losing his mind, hanging this close to Beth, smelling her, wanting to touch her, he suddenly backed away, releasing her from his improvised jail. "He'll know you're the one I'm buying the horse for."

"So? I don't go around in jewels and a tiara. He won't know I have money."

"He'll know when he sees your check." Word always got around when there was a chicken to be plucked.

"You write a check and then I'll write you a check later. We could do that, couldn't we? Oh!" She beamed at him and he held his breath. "I know. We'll tell him I'm your girlfriend!"

Jed thought he was going to choke to death. He coughed several times to regain his breath, and Beth beat him on the back.

"Are you all right? What's wrong?" she asked, her eyes wide with concern.

"Damn, woman! That's the craziest idea I've ever heard." He backed up a couple of more steps. This time she came after him.

"Why?"

"Joe would never believe it."

"You think I'm not pretty enough?"

Jed slumped against the opposite stable door, defeat filling him. He couldn't lie to her. "You're too pretty. Joe wouldn't believe anyone like you would be interested in someone like me."

Her eyelids lowered and she stepped to his side, one hand sliding up his chest. "Sure he would, sugar. I'm a good actress." She was using the drawl that had fooled him this morning when she'd mentioned that blasted manicure.

He had to do something to get her away from him before he wrapped his arms around her and looked for the nearest pile of hay. “Okay, you can go. Ask Miss Abby if she needs us after lunch.”

Excitement filled her. But before she raced to the house to do as he said, she stretched herself against him and kissed his cheek. “Thanks, Jed.”

Then she was gone.

“Lord have mercy, what have I gotten myself into?” he asked the horses in the barn.

None of them answered.

Already realizing Jed preferred silence to conversation, Beth tried to contain herself on the ride into Oklahoma and not ask any questions. That resolve lasted for almost half an hour. Then her excitement took over.

“How’d you learn about this horse?”

“I trained him.”

“For barrel racing?”

“No, as a cutting horse.”

He stared straight ahead at the road, never looking at her.

“How do you know he’ll make a good racer?”

“He’s fast.”

“Did you—”

“Do you ever stop asking questions?” He turned to glance at her, irritation on his face.

She grinned, refusing to be offended. “Nope.”

“Listen, he’s got strong haunches, he’s low to the ground, but he’s got a long stride, and he’s very intelligent.”

“Why didn’t you buy him? He sounds perfect. Was he too pricey?”

“Nope. He’s too small for a man my size. That’s why I think Joe will sell him. Joe’s a big man, too.”

She let her gaze wander his length, from the Stetson, past his broad shoulders to his long, hard thighs, down to his dusty boots. She drew a deep breath. She didn’t know how much more testosterone she could handle.

“He doesn’t have a wife to ride her?”

“Nope. He’s a widower, no children. He breeds quarter horses. Shorty doesn’t fit the mold, so Joe didn’t want him for breeding stock. He’s a gelding.”

She thought about what he said. “Then we ought to get him cheap.”

“He’s got good bloodlines.”

“But—”

“We’ll pay a good price, but it will be a fair one. Just don’t give away that you’re the real buyer.”

His clipped order wasn’t anything new, but it made Beth want to have him experience some of the discomfort she felt at his curt tone. Abby had pointed out to her more than once that her responses weren’t always wise ones.

“Then I’d better practice being your girlfriend,” she said as she undid her seat belt. Then she slid across the bench seat until her body was pressed against his right side.

He jerked the wheel in shock. “What the hell are you doing?” he snarled when he had the truck under control. “Get back to your side of the truck!”

“You’re not being very friendly, Jed,” she teased, glad to see he was capable of losing his iron control. “I won’t be able to convince Joe unless I’m used to touching you.” She lifted her left hand and settled it on his tense shoulder.

Apparently she’d gone too far. Jed yanked the wheel to the right as he stood on the brakes. Before Beth even realized his intent, he’d stopped on the side of the road.

Slamming the truck into Park, he reached for her without warning. His lips came down on hers, hard and demanding. Hot, controlling.

Beth, pressed against his chest, her breasts flattened, her eyes closed, resented his attempt to conquer. She knew that was all he intended. She even realized he wasn't going to hurt her. Just conquer her.

But she was made of sterner stuff than Jed Davis realized. And she gave as good as she got. Her hands slid up his chest to riffle through his dark hair. Her mouth moved under his.

And the kiss changed.

Suddenly they were equally involved in the touching, the demanding...the sizzle. So much so that Beth thought she was going to faint. But she was going to enjoy every second of it until then. Jed Davis was some kisser.

He almost threw her away from him only seconds later, staring at her as if she'd been a rattlesnake he'd found in his bed.

"Lady, you're crazy!" he snapped, but she noted that his breathing was no more even than hers.

"Me? I'm not the one who grabbed—who started this."

"You should've kept your seat belt on. Put it on now!" he ordered as he faced the front of the truck again, refusing to look at her.

This time she accepted his order. Sliding back across the bench seat, she snapped the seat belt and faced forward. If she looked at him, she was afraid she might beg for another kiss.

Jed breathed a sigh of relief when they reached Joseph Lander's ranch. He'd made a big mistake letting Beth come with him. In fact, he'd made a big mistake taking her on as a pupil.

He didn't mix business and pleasure. In fact, he didn't indulge in much pleasure. His goals were too important. And he never stayed in one place too long. He had learned early in life that if you stayed in one place too long, you began to care. And then it was just that much easier to get hurt when you were forced to move to a new foster home.

He wouldn't be staying long at the Circle K, that was for sure. Because the lady beside him had already shown him enough pleasure to scare the daylight out of him.

Not bothering to tell her to stay in the truck, because he knew she wouldn't, he got out and headed for the barn. He figured Joe wouldn't be in the house in the middle of the afternoon.

Before he got to the barn, however, the man he was looking for strode out to meet him. "Jed Davis! Good to see you, boy. How have you been?"

Jed shook his hand and returned the greeting. Before he'd finished, Joe's gaze went over his shoulder.

"Well, hello, there, little lady. You with this scalawag?" Joe asked with a grin.

Jed tried not to stiffen as Beth stepped to his side, sliding her arm through his. "Yes, I am," she said clearly, that beaming smile on her face.

"You're steppin' up in the world, Jed," Joe said with an approving nod.

"Thanks." Jed spent several more minutes passing the time of day with the rancher. Certain protocol had to be followed before he could get down to business. Finally he said, "I wondered if you still had Shorty?"

"Shorty? That scrub? Yeah, he's here." A thoughtful look came into Joe's eyes. "You interested in him?"

Jed shrugged, as if he wasn't sure. "I might be."

"What for? He's not big enough to carry you."

"Yeah, but I've got a smaller rider in mind. I think he might work."

"I'll show him to you, but I'm not sure I want to part with him." He turned toward the barn, then stopped. "Little lady, it's pretty dusty out there. You want to wait in the house? My housekeeper can fix you some iced tea."

Jed tensed, afraid Beth would blast the man between the eyes.

"Why, how thoughtful of you, but I don't like to let Jed out of my sights. Besides, I dressed cowboy so I'd fit in," she told the old man, blinking her lashes to great effect.

“Honey, I’ve never seen a cowboy look as good as you, but you’re welcome to come along,” Joe said, before turning again toward the barn.

Jed looked at Beth and she dared send him a wink along with her smile. He barely shook his head at her and went after Joe. She was wearing her jeans, but after lunch she’d changed to a soft rose-colored blouse and added some silver earrings. Joe was right about how good she looked.

And tasted.

Nope, he wasn’t going to think about those moments in his truck. Because if he did, he’d go crazy.

On the other side of the barn, Joe hollered at one of the cowboys working in a nearby corral. “Larry, fetch Shorty out of the pasture.”

Jed caught up with Joe and leaned against the corral, watching the action going on around him. Suddenly he saw someone he knew.

“Floyd? Is that you?”

An older cowboy, cleaning out the stables, straightened and squinted into the sun. “Jed?” He threw down the pitchfork he’d been wielding and came out of the barn to give Jed a hug. They’d worked together when Jed first went out on his own. Floyd had helped Jed learn a lot of lessons.

“How you doing, boy?” Floyd asked as he stepped back.

“Fine. And yourself?”

Floyd let his gaze slip to the boss and then back to Jed. “Just fine.”

“Better get back to work, Floyd,” Joe said, and all geniality was gone from his voice.

“Yes, sir,” Floyd muttered. He sent a regretful look toward Jed and walked back into the barn.

Jed turned to look at Joe. “You unhappy with Floyd?”

Joe shrugged. “He’s not a hard worker.”

Beth moved closer to Jed and slipped her arm through his again. “He seemed nice,” she said cheerfully, smiling at Joe.

Joe’s mouth tightened. “He won’t be staying here long. First excuse I can find, I’ll send him down the road.”

Jed frowned. He didn’t know what had gone wrong between Joe and Floyd, but he knew who he’d trust first. And it wasn’t Joe. He wished he had some time to speak to his old friend alone.

As if she’d read his mind, Beth moved over to the rancher and began asking him about two horses in a separate corral beside the barn. Joe, always playing the gallant, took her arm and led her over there.

Jed backed toward the barn, keeping his eye on Joe. When he reached the door of the barn, he leaned against it, casually, and called softly. “Floyd?”

“Yeah, boy?” Floyd responded just as softly.

“What’s going on?”

“You mean with old moneybags?”

“Yeah.”

“I caught him abusing a horse. He says I was trying to show him up. I’ve only been here about a month. Can’t afford to blow off my job. But I reckon I’ll have that decision made for me soon. Some of the other hands have been talkin’.”

Jed had heard rumors about Joe, but he’d never had proof. His jaw hardened. He knew Floyd would have trouble working for a man who abused his animals. As would Jed.

“Want a new job?”

“Yeah. You heard of any?”

“Yep. I’ll guarantee you one. Got much to pack?”

“Nah. You know me. I travel light.”

“As soon as we finish business, go pack your things.”

He didn't want Floyd to upset Joe until his business was done. He saw the cowboy coming back across the pasture, a rope on Shorty.

Moving to the corral, he opened the gate and the cowboy led the horse inside. Jed then made sure the gate was closed and watched as the cowboy took his rope off Shorty. He studied the horse to see if he was okay.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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