HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired™

Once Upon a Cowboy

Pamela Tracy

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Tracy P.

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Cowboy HomecomingA bull-riding injury has sent Joel McCreedy crashing—literally—into his tiny Iowa hometown. But the last thing the prodigal son wants is to stay. On top of a bruised head and ego, he has relationships to mend and a reputation to clear. And then there's lovely Beth Armstrong, his nephews' teacher, who's willing to give them all lessons in family and forgiveness.But Joel isn't the dutiful "family first" man Beth deserves. Or is he? Suddenly, instead of wrangling bulls he's helping with homework. And instead of craving his next win, he's determined to be Beth's once-in-a-lifetime love.

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"Unca Joel is walking with me. You can come?" little Caleb asked Beth.

"No, but thank you for the offer. I need to be heading home. I've got some things to do," Beth replied.

"Go ahead, walk with us," Joel invited. "I'll use the time to ask you out again and to thank you for saving my life."

"I didn't save your life. You'd have regained consciousness and driven yourself to the hospital."

"No, I wouldn't have. I needed you."

"Well, you've said thank-you already. That's enough." She checked her watch. "I need to be going."

"You're right," Joel jumped in. "Going out with me? Tonight? Dinner?"

"Joel, you'll be here for a few months and then you'll leave. You've always been really good at leaving people behind," Beth said, tussling Caleb's hair and heading for her car.

"You take every opportunity to throw that in my face. Maybe I never knew they cared."

It was too late. She was out of hearing range.

Caleb tugged on Joel's pant leg. "I care."

Dear Reader,

The idea for *Once Upon a Cowboy* came to me during a church service. No, really, I was paying attention to the sermon about the prodigal son. It's just that the minister was touching on some points I'd never really considered. First was the real definition of prodigal. It means heavy spending. For years, I thought it meant absent. Then, the lesson veered toward what the father could have done from the beginning, when his son asked for the inheritance early. The father could have taken his son to the city gate and had him stoned for being disobedient.

When I think about how many times I've been disobedient … And, if you want to know the truth, I always pay attention to Prodigal Son sermons because I've never quite been able to shake the belief that the older son had something to complain about.

Thus, *Once Upon a Cowboy* was born, with a returning hero (Joel) who missed out in so many family memories but is soon determined not to miss out on any more—especially when he falls in love with a most unlikely heroine. Then, there's the heroine (Beth) who has to learn that taking risks is part of life—and who better to teach her than a wounded cowboy who wants to get in the saddle again? Throw in an older brother who needs his younger brother more than he'll admit, a trio of nephews who do not understand the concept of privacy, a stepfather who only wants what's best for both his boys, and a misguided mother who needs forgiveness, and you have the kind of story that only happily-ever-after can provide.

Thank you so much for reading *Once Upon a Cowboy*.

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But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

—*Luke* 15:20

To those returning and those who never strayed: both take courage. Also, to the mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers who welcome the wanderers home.

Chapter One

A memory knocked.

Before Beth Armstrong had time to even think about opening the door to the past, she slammed on her brakes, hard. Her wheels slid and the car went sideways until she finally came to an abrupt stop facing the royal blue truck that looked hauntingly familiar.

The truck wasn't going anywhere. Not after the power skid that took it off-road, bouncing over an irrigation ditch and plowing into the McClanahans' fence.

Help me, Lord, and please let whoever is in there be all right. Don't let this be a fatality.

She pushed open her car's door and—with only the moon to witness her flight—managed to make it through the grass, then down and up the irrigation ditch. She climbed clumsily over one of the broken fence posts using the truck to steady herself.

The vehicle was caught in mangled barbed wire and still warm to the touch. The smell of gas and exhaust warred with the strong aroma of the McClanahans' hay field. She balanced on the shattered fence, trying to get the courage to move forward and wishing she had more than the glow from her headlights combined with the truck's taillights to assist her. As if answering her prayer, the truck's driver's side door opened, and the light from the inside dome gave her all the illumination she needed.

The memory stopped knocking. Just one look at what lay in the truck's bed—a gear bag and bull rope—opened the door to the past and let the memory in.

Joel McCreedy.

The prodigal son.

It had been more than eight years since he'd been the focus of her girlhood fantasies.

He didn't look like a fantasy now. He slouched forward against the steering wheel, his face turned her way. His eyes were closed, and a trickle of blood ran from a cut just above his left eye. She closed her eyes. *Blood. Not good.*

Opening her eyes, she reached in and gently touched his shoulder. "Joel, are you awake? Are you okay?" Her voice sounded loud in the silence of the moment. He didn't move at all. She looked at his chest to make sure it moved up and down. It did. He was still alive.

"Joel!"

He moaned, didn't open his eyes and then slumped forward. This time, his chest hit the horn. Beth nearly toppled over thanks to her precarious perch, before shouting again, this time over the noise, "Joel!"

Well, okay, she could holler Joel's name until the cows came home for all the good it would do. Not that he'd be able to hear her over the blare of his horn. Carefully, she nudged him back so he wasn't pushed against the steering wheel. Nothing changed, not the expression on his face or the stillness of his body.

Roanoke had one ambulance, and she could get him to town faster than it could get here, most likely. "Joel, you might need to help a bit here."

His eyelids fluttered, and he grunted. She took both hands and shoved with all her strength. As he slowly adjusted to the passenger side, papers, folders and what looked like a Bible fell to the floorboard. "You weigh a ton, Joel," she muttered.

"And that's just my aching head," he moaned.

Good, at least he was conscious and somewhat lucid. When he was finally settled on the passenger side, she let out her breath. She got behind the wheel and tried closing the door—no such luck—so she buckled her seat belt and put his truck in Reverse.

One thing about old, old trucks. They were made of pure steel. Backing up, Beth managed to destroy a bit more of the McClanahans' fence. She bounced over the irrigation ditch and skidded only

a bit on the dirt road as she aimed for traction and headed into town, stopping just long enough to turn off her own car's headlights and grab her purse, before hurrying back to Joel's truck.

He hadn't moved.

With one hand clutching the door closed and the other clasped tight on the steering wheel, she made it maybe half a mile before Joel finally stirred again and turned to look at her. In the shadows, she couldn't see his eyes, but she knew they were a deep brown and full of hurt.

She had a million questions and not all of them had to do with his health. Joel McCreedy, the prodigal son, back in Roanoke, Iowa. He must have just arrived, because if he'd been here a day or two, she'd have known.

She braced herself and let the driver's side door swing open. Then, she pulled her cell phone from her pocket and hit the zero. She should have done that first thing. After a moment, an operator came on and Beth asked for hospital emergency. Once she'd warned them about what to expect, she hung up and tossed her cell phone on the dash. It promptly slid to the ground. Forcing the door to close again and holding it tightly, she again looked at the man slumped next to her, suddenly aware of the feel of his weight leaning against her right arm.

His forehead hadn't been hot, but his body was. She could feel it through her sleeve. His blue T-shirt was tight against a rock hard chest. Jeans covered legs so long they reached the passenger side door.

His eyes remained shut, but a tiny bit of color had returned to his face. The trickle of blood started to drip off his chin and onto his shirt.

As if to remind her not to look there, not to dwell on the blood, the truck hit a bump, and Beth's head almost hit the roof.

For the next half hour, until lights shimmered in the distance and the town came into view, Beth concentrated on keeping the driver's side door shut, listening to make sure Joel still breathed and making it to town. Easing up on the gas, Beth passed the convenience store and small motel beyond the Welcome to Roanoke, Iowa sign. The hospital was just a few blocks in. Joel finally twitched a little, shifting his weight away from her, but instead of feeling relief that he was finally giving her space, she felt loss.

Not what she needed.

Joel McCreedy was no longer the boy she remembered. But he was still the man most of the town wanted to forget.

In the scheme of things, a little blood and a wicked headache were the least of Joel McCreedy's problems.

Nothing was going as planned. This wasn't how he had imagined his homecoming. Even in his wildest nightmares—and after riding a good draw named Homeless a few weeks ago, he'd had some pretty wild ones—he'd not figured on being turned away from his childhood home, wrecking his beloved truck and then being escorted to the hospital by a gorgeous female.

He was lucky she'd been on the deserted road that late at night and was willing to stop.

"We almost there?" he asked, careful not to move his head. Waves of pain were just one more unwelcome reminder of a lousy evening.

"Five minutes," she answered, not wasting words. He liked that.

She obviously knew him, had called him by name, and knew her way around Roanoke. If it didn't hurt so much to talk, he'd ask her name. Instead, he concentrated on keeping his head still and gritting his teeth every time she hit a bump.

"When did you get back, Joel?"

Joel closed his eyes. He'd made it to Solitaire Farm sometime this evening. How long ago? Thirty minutes? An hour? Two? Did it matter?

"This evening," he finally answered. The sky had already turned to night when his beloved, aged 1958 royal blue Ford truck idled in front of the sign reading Solitaire Farm. A home he'd turned his back on almost a decade ago and that had now turned its back on him.

No more questions followed. Maybe she figured from his short answers that he wasn't up for conversation.

Truth was, he wasn't up for much of anything else, either. He'd left New Mexico yesterday, pretty much driving straight through. He'd caught a catnap or two at rest stops. Still, he'd had almost twenty-four hours of sitting in one position, trying to ignore the pain in his back and the pain in his heart.

Without the rodeo, where did he belong?

They reached the tiny Roanoke hospital. She managed to hit the curb as she pulled into the parking lot, and then skidded to a stop in front of the emergency room doors.

More medical bills, great.

There wasn't but five dollars in his pocket. He did, however, already have a folder full of medical expenses—with more to come—and a stack of unpaid credit card bills. The debt and his need for family were about to increase.

He'd waited too long and now instead of a hero's welcome and a bank account guaranteed to make his older brother sit up and take notice, Joel had his tail between his legs.

The legs that weren't strong enough to allow him to walk into the emergency room alone. Instead, he had to lean on a young woman whose name he couldn't recall and a hospital attendant he recognized from his high school graduating class.

Kyle Tuckee was the attendant's name. He'd been two years ahead of Joel and a second stringer for the football team. He seemed to move a lot faster now, sprinting from the emergency room door to Joel's truck.

Through the glass doors, Joel also recognized the woman manning the front desk. She'd been a friend of his mother's. She raised an eyebrow at the sight of Joel, quickly recovered and hurried to assist. She opened a swinging door and soon Joel was escorted into a tiny room with a bed and chair.

"What happened? When did Joel get home?" Delores Peabody asked, helping him into the bed and reaching for a blood pressure cuff.

Joel closed his eyes. Nausea kept him from answering, but his hearing still worked.

"I don't know how long he's been back," his rescuer said. She really was quite beautiful, with blond hair just reaching her shoulders and a compact body. He was tempted to open his eyes again, just to get another look. Unfortunately, she wasn't done talking. "And he's not with me, not really, and please don't tell my mother that I'm the one who brought him here. I just happened to see him drive off the road."

Joel's interest was piqued, but before the women could say more the doctor came in. He asked the nurse a few questions and came over to stand next to Joel.

"How are you feeling?"

"Head hurts," was all Joel managed to say.

The young woman started in, and this time she didn't say anything about her mother, just got straight to the point. "He was driving east on Rural Route 7 and went off the road. He didn't slow down or anything. He hit the McClanahans' fence, I'd say maybe forty-five minutes ago, probably going about fifty. When I got to him, he was pitched forward. He was unconscious then, but only for a moment, and he had a cut above his left eye, which kept bleeding. I figured I could get him here faster than the ambulance could get there. I scooted him over because I didn't think I could get him out of his truck and into my car. Will he be all right?"

"Are you family?" the doctor asked.

"No, more a friend of the family."

"Has family been contacted?"

Delores said, “I’ll do that now.” She left the room, and the younger woman followed.

Funny, throughout this whole mess, until tonight, Joel had been on his own. He’d already done the hospitalization route—for two days after he lost the ability to walk. Then he’d started physical therapy before running out of money.

He’d been alone but hadn’t really felt alone.

Until now.

Beth had a total of four hours of sleep, thanks to Joel McCreedy and then the emergency room. It had been almost midnight by the time she had retrieved her car with the help of her oldest sister and roommate, and then finally made it home to their small house on Oak Street. She’d been too keyed up to even think about going to bed.

Bad move.

Roanoke Elementary would celebrate its hundred year anniversary this year. Just three weeks ago, Beth had started her second year as its kindergarten teacher. Fridays were always rough, but today was one for the record book.

“Miss Armstrong,” one of her girls said, “you already read us that page.”

“Twice,” another bright little girl spoke up.

“Keep reading,” a little boy suggested.

Little Mitzi Gabor tapped Beth on the knee. “Maybe we could have free time?” she said in a hopeful whisper.

“Good idea,” Beth whispered back.

Soon, she had a classroom full of kids playing cars, building towers, coloring and some even sitting at their desks with a book. Most of the kids who chose to read looked content. Matt McCreedy, frowning at an upside-down book, looked lonely.

As Beth headed for her own desk to do a little catch-up work, she wondered what he was really seeing.

Beth knew what she *wished* she wasn’t seeing. Her mother, the school secretary, walking by the classroom, lips pursed, a half dozen times.

Since the three Armstrong girls hit puberty, their mother had had two purposes: educate the girls so they could be self-sufficient and/or keep the girls safe and marry them off to nice churchgoing doctors or lawyers or business owners. Patsy wasn’t old-fashioned or a snob. She just wanted her daughters to graduate from college and/or be married to men who chose nice, safe, well-paying professions.

Two areas in which Mom felt her own life had suffered.

Beth’s oldest sister, Linda, hadn’t met either criteria: no college, no nice young man. Middle sister, Susan, had started college, but dropped out to get married and Mom didn’t really approve of her husband’s profession as a police officer.

Not a *safe* career.

Her mother’s dreams settled like a yoke across Beth’s shoulders. Attending teachers college hadn’t been a choice, it had been an order. To save money, Beth had managed to graduate in three years instead of four. And right now, her mother was championing the new youth minister at their church. Being a youth minister wasn’t a well-paying job, but Nathan Fisher was also a physical therapist.

Beth set most of the class to cleaning up their seat area. Then, row by row, she called them by her desk where the mailboxes were. With the exception of Matt, all did her bidding.

He’d been even more lethargic than usual today. No doubt she could blame some of it on his uncle Joel and a late-night call from the hospital. Quite a lot for a five-year-old to handle.

No tiny bits of paper were on the floor by his desk. He’d barely started his cutting project. As for crayons, he had only used three—a brown, a black and a red—and they were stored in his

crayon box. The upside-down book was already placed neatly in his desk. His lunch box, she knew, contained a peanut butter sandwich with three small bite marks.

That was all she could convince him to eat.

"Come on, Matt. You have a few papers to take home."

He shrugged. This wasn't what Mandy would have wanted.

Which was why Beth had headed to Solitaire Farm last night. She'd been mad, and although she wasn't one to act on impulse, when Jared hadn't shown up for his parent-teacher conference time, she'd taken it personally.

So at seven-thirty, after she'd finally gotten her classroom back in order and prepped for the following day, she'd headed for Solitaire Farm and Matt McCreedy's father.

After a long day on the farm, Jared hadn't been in the mood to hear what she had to say. He'd promised to reschedule. Thanked her for caring enough to make a home visit. Then, politely walked her to her car.

She and Linda had been his late wife's best friends. Mandy had been in Linda's class, but had always identified with the youngest Armstrong, treating her as a favorite kid sister and then an adult best friend. For nine years, Solitaire Farm had been a second home. That Mandy's sons were suffering broke Beth's heart.

"Matt, I need you to get your backpack."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Beth swallowed. Joel was standing in her classroom doorway and didn't look like he'd been in an automobile accident at all.

She blurted the first words that came to mind. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned, and eight years of maturity completely deserted her in one heart-melting moment —taking her right back to her schoolgirl crush.

"I'm feeling much better," he said. "Just a mild concussion. Thanks for asking. I'm lucky you were around to help. As for what I'm doing here, I needed to get my truck in for service. Without it, I either walk or hitch rides. I told Billy I'd meet him here at three."

"Here, as in my classroom?" The words came out more accusing than she meant them to be. But she didn't need any more questions from fellow teachers, not about Joel. And she certainly didn't need her mother to come marching down the hallway, all pursed lips and disapproving. Plus, she was a bit concerned about the look on Matt's face. The boy was staring at his uncle half in awe and half in terror.

"I also need to return this." He pulled her cell phone from his back jeans pocket.

"Miss Armstrong, Mitzi put trash on my floor," came a small, accusing voice.

Sure enough, little Mitzi, instead of walking all the way to the classroom trash can, had dumped her paper, her broken crayons and her half-eaten chicken finger by another student's desk.

A third student added to the fray, "Teacher, I gotta go …"

Joel smiled and laid the phone on a bookcase by the door. "I'll let you get back to work. Maybe you'll let me take you out for dinner some night as a proper thank-you."

"I don't think so," Beth said, giving Mitzi a look that sent her scurrying to clean up her mess *again*. She tried the same look on Joel, but it only made his grin widen before he left her classroom.

What really amazed Beth was how easily he waltzed into and out of the elementary school, without the tiniest hint of guilt. Now, her mother would do more than just walk by Beth's door with her lips pursed. Now, the other teachers and some of the parents wouldn't start with the polite, "So, I hear you were up late last night?"

Their questions would be more concrete.

Because Joel McCreedy wasn't just a prodigal son, he was really a prodigal thief.

Chapter Two

"You've got some nerve."

The softly spoken words came from a source Joel knew well and one who stood blocking the school exit. Patsy Armstrong. She hadn't changed much in the last eight years. She looked like her two older daughters, tall, brunette, with a sturdy bearing that aged well.

Beth didn't look, or act, much like her mother.

Maybe that's why he hadn't recognized Beth right away last night? That, plus the fact she'd been four years behind him. He'd been in her oldest sister's graduating class.

"Hello, Mrs. Armstrong. I wondered if you were still working here."

Actually, he hadn't wondered. Until just this minute, she'd existed in the "out of sight, out of mind" realm of life. Joel was much too busy worrying about how Jared would react to forced hospitality. Jared's initial response—yesterday evening—had been the same as Mrs. Armstrong's.

You've got some nerve.

"I most certainly do still work here." Mrs. Armstrong wasn't finished. "I believe in an honest day's work for an honest day's pay."

Implying Joel didn't. She definitely wasn't one who would consider bull riding a profession, and it wouldn't matter how many purses Joel won or who his sponsor was. Bull riding didn't come with benefits like unemployment, a 401(k) or retirement. Not really.

The final bell rang. Joel could hear classroom doors opening and the excited clamor of student freedom, but Mrs. Armstrong wasn't finished. She just got louder. "Did you stop by the office and get a guest pass?"

"My nephews attend here."

"Your name is not listed on their student cards. You'll still need to sign in at the office. There just might be a problem."

A problem? The McCreedys had been attending this school since Joel's grandfather. Joel had not only studied here, but even when he was in high school, he'd helped out at the elementary school during the Rodeo Club events. The problem was Mrs. Armstrong.

"You going to send me to detention?" Joel knew the words would only make things worse, but he couldn't control his tongue.

She opened her mouth and narrowed her eyes. Joel just knew he didn't want to find out what she was thinking, so he did the first thing he could think of.

"I was here to return Beth's cell phone. Wish I'd thought to take down her number before I gave it back." He winked and moved around her toward the front door. Before exiting, he looked back. Mrs. Armstrong had closed her mouth but now had turned an interesting purplish color. Behind her, he could see Beth, two lines of students in her control.

Best place to be, safest place to be, thought Joel, would be the parking lot and inside his stepfather's minivan. He pushed open the school door and almost ran Billy down.

Joel recognized many of the adults, parents now, starting to gather in front of the school. His name floated on the air and a few scattered greetings sounded.

Nothing like what he had expected. What was wrong with Roanoke? Eight years wasn't that long.

"I thought I'd pick you up at the hospital," Billy said. Careful not to jar the small boy whose hand he was holding, Billy took Joel by the arm and drew him close so his words couldn't be heard by others. "Mind telling me what brought you to the school?"

"The hospital released me at noon and I took the truck to Tiny's garage. I had some papers to gather up and found Beth Armstrong's cell phone on the floorboard of my truck. Boy, she's really grown up to be—" Joel began.

"Mr. Staples," Patsy said, "I'm glad you're here. I need a minute."

Joel clearly and somewhat comically interpreted the look Billy shot him as, *Look, you've gotten me in trouble, too.*

Billy switched Caleb's hand to Joel's and then tossed him a set of keys. "Keep an eye on Caleb. Ryan and Matt will be out in a moment. Get them in the car and have them wait. I'll just be a minute."

Before Joel could protest, the chubby three-year-old tugged his fingers, looked up and said, "Let's go, Unca."

Unca?

At least Caleb was able to go with the flow. At Billy's nod, Beth released Matt, who walked toward Joel as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. Ryan, old enough to make his own exit, left his teacher and joined them. He didn't look too pleased about Joel's presence, either.

Not even twenty-four hours in town and Joel had managed to annoy everyone except Caleb. Joel figured he'd just broken a record, but knew there'd be no applause.

Ryan led the way to a minivan parked toward the back of the parking lot. To get to the car, Joel had to walk by people he'd once called friends. Most looked surprised. Some taken aback. Once his nephews—all little replicas of Jared—had stowed backpacks and secured their seat belts, Joel took his place on the passenger side.

With his truck needing repairs, Joel couldn't leave. With Joel himself needing repairs, Jared couldn't turn him away. Add to that the fact he had just enough money to get to the next town, some twenty miles away—well, no matter how you looked at it, storm clouds were gathering.

"So," came the beginning of a conversation from the backseat, "why did you take the money?" Oh, yes, Ryan was definitely his older brother's clone. Arms crossed, wasting no time, eyes accusing, Ryan wanted answers.

"What?"

"Some of my friends say you're a thief, that you stole money before you left town. Is that why you never came back? Is that why we don't know you? Why are you back now?"

Joel's experience with kids was almost nonexistent. He was pretty sure, though, that Ryan was a bit more mature—and cynical—than most eight-year-olds. Even so, Joel doubted that Ryan would understand that half of Solitaire Farm had, at one time, belonged to Joel, and that as a young, stupid kid, he'd wanted his share right then, in cash.

"I didn't steal any money. I took what was mine."

Ryan made a *psst* sound as Billy opened the driver's side door and slid behind the wheel. Wow. Joel was curious to know what Beth's mother had wanted to say, and why—as the school secretary—she had a right to say anything. Instead, he looked at the little men in the backseat and shelved his questions. Billy, looking a little annoyed, took advantage of the lull.

"What did the doctor say?"

"The doctor said the accident did not make things worse and that I feel better than I deserve after hitting that fence last night. He recommended a good physical therapist."

"You hit that fence really good." Ryan suddenly forgot his annoyance and sounded impressed. "Trey says it will cost a pretty penny."

"Trey?"

"Max McClanahan III," Billy explained.

The McCreedys' nearest neighbors were the McClanahans. Joel had spent his childhood chasing after Maxwell McClanahan II, who must be married and a dad now, with a son also named Max. One who was about Ryan's age. Joel suddenly felt a little humbled by all he didn't know.

"Joel never does anything halfway," Billy said before turning to face Joel. "I'm looking forward," he said glumly, "to hearing what's really wrong with you and what made you come back now."

"You have to go to a therapist because you hit a fence?" Ryan questioned. "I hit fences all the time. You do walk funny. Is that because you hit the fence?"

“Joel doesn’t walk funny,” Billy said.

“Just slow and careful,” Joel agreed.

“Mommy couldn’t walk at all,” Matt finally added to the conversation, “right before she died.”

“Okay,” Billy said quickly, “who wants ice cream?”

To Joel’s way of thinking, it was the perfect time to change the topic of conversation. Matt’s comment was a bit too deep for an errant uncle to elaborate on. Looked like it was way too deep for a grandfather to deal with, too.

“Dad’s not with us,” Matt pointed out.

Ryan wasn’t about to let that interfere with the possibility of getting ice cream. “We can take him something.”

“It will melt.”

Billy, who’d mastered the art of keeping kids happy during his forty-year stint as the principal, said, “He’ll be eating plenty of ice cream tomorrow during Caleb’s party.”

“I’m three,” Caleb chattered. “’Morrow.”

Matt sat back, satisfied that his father wasn’t being left out.

Joel had to admire him. He was the gatekeeper of the brothers. Ryan, it looked like, was the mouth. Caleb was the comic relief.

Jared didn’t know how lucky he was.

Watching the boys sit forward on their hands, anticipating an ice cream stop, triggered some memories. Of course, back then, Jared had been the gatekeeper. Joel had been the comic relief. The one who had jumped over the gate, landed on his head and got all the attention.

They shared *mouth* duty.

Or tried to share.

Sometimes it had felt like the farm—make that the town of Roanoke—wasn’t big enough for two McCreedy boys.

Since his release from the hospital Joel had caught glimpses of his hometown and the people who made it special. In many ways, it was just another small town with its inhabitants going about their day, doing their jobs, taking care of their families and making memories. Since leaving eight years ago, Joel had been in towns a bit smaller and cities a lot bigger. He’d never stayed long enough to know who owned the auto repair shop, or even who was the fastest grocery store cashier, or which little old lady at church gave the best hugs, or what flavor ice cream was ordered the most at the ice cream parlor.

All three boys wanted chocolate. Billy chose vanilla.

Joel joined the boys and had chocolate, minus the cone. They ate inside the Ice Cream Shack because, according to Matt, “We can’t drip in the car. Grandpa likes to keep his van clean.”

“Caleb drips,” Ryan agreed.

“I yike ice cream.” Caleb nodded vigorously and lived up to Ryan’s accusation. In just a matter of seconds, his ice cream cone was gone, but there was enough ice cream smeared on his face and on the floor to make another one. Ryan had just a bit on the side of his cheek. Joel took his last spoonful and looked over at Billy and Matt. Billy was making headway, but Matt was so careful not to drip or make any kind of mess that he almost had a full cone.

Then Matt stopped licking altogether. His eyes were glued on the front window and toward the parking lot.

Ryan gloated. “It’s your teacher, and you have ice cream on your nose.”

He didn’t, but Matt believed him and rubbed his sleeve across his clean face.

Joel jumped up and held open the door. It gave him an even better view of his rescuer and Matt’s teacher. Her blond hair bordered on white. It fluffed out and just hit the top of her shoulders. A dark blue skirt was topped by a white-and-dark-blue-striped blouse. Colorful tennis shoes finished the outfit.

He'd like to chase those tennis shoes. "Anything else change?" he asked.

She raised one eyebrow. "What?"

"Besides you growing up while I was away."

She hesitated. "I'm not as easy to get along with now."

"I don't believe it for a minute," Joel said, and checked out her hand, her left hand. No ring. He should have checked earlier.

"Let me buy you an ice cream." It wasn't exactly the dinner he'd suggested earlier, but she'd already turned that down. This could be a start.

Was it his imagination, or did the look she shot Billy appear sympathetic?

"Hi, Beth," Billy greeted, frowning in Joel's direction. "Looks like our paths are crossing quite a bit these last twenty-four hours."

"Susan called. She's wanting ice cream." Beth looked at Joel, her expression wary. "I'm in a hurry, so no thanks." Her chin went up, for no reason since he'd done nothing to insult her, and she headed to the counter. She ordered a full gallon of bubblegum.

Bubblegum? This might be her only flaw.

She followed that by ordering a chocolate chip cone. Joel stepped forward to pay, but she shook her head. The young man behind the cash register looked bored. Definitely not the kind of kid who would notice a guy trying to impress a girl and help him out.

"Bubblegum?" Joel questioned.

"Susan's pregnant. It's all she wants to eat. She puts blueberries on top." With that, Beth stopped paying attention to Joel, smiled at all three of the boys, especially Matt, and took a seat at the opposite end of the ice cream parlor. She pulled a book from her purse while she waited for her order.

"I feel like I struck out," Joel complained, "before I even made it to bat."

"What do you expect?" For the first time, Billy's usually calm demeanor slipped. He stared at Joel, an unwavering expression that said *talk, confess, convince*.

"I expected—" Joel carefully chose his words because his nephews, staring at him all big eyed and tense, didn't need to hear the family's dirty laundry "—I expected to be able to say I was sorry and for all to be forgiven."

"That may take a bit of time."

"I was eighteen, an adult. Granted, I didn't leave in the most sensible manner. But I didn't expect for the whole town to treat me like a pariah."

To Joel's surprise, Billy didn't rush to assure him that everything was all right and his friends would come around. Instead, his stepfather's lips pursed together and a definite look of disappointment came over his expression.

"What?" Joel asked. "I chose the rodeo over the farm. It wasn't big enough for the two of us, anyway, and it was Jared's dream, not mine. Still, I should be able to come home for—"

"You boys stay put," Billy ordered. "Matt, finish your ice cream. Ryan, clean Caleb's face." He stood, motioning for Joel to follow him outside.

Joel stood too quickly, and then had to wait for his balance to return. All three boys looked at him like he was in trouble.

Beth still had her nose in her book.

The late-September sun still hovered high in the sky. A few cars were traveling down Main. Billy'd already made it to a distant picnic table. He sat with a rigid demeanor, his lips still pursed.

Joel waited, but Billy looked as if he expected Joel to do the talking.

The sunlight shimmered on the black-topped street in front of the Ice Cream Shack. Across from it was the barbershop where Joel had first climbed in a chair, sat on a padded seat with a cape over him and felt grown-up. Next door was the grocery store, not nearly as big as what the city boasted, but with a candy aisle that lived up to a preschooler's dreams. Everything looked the same; it was the feel of the place that had changed.

Fine. Joel would start. “Out with it, Billy,” he ordered, carefully sitting across from his stepfather. “What’s going on? I expected Jared to be mad, but to turn me away when I’m truly down on my luck? And people I waved to on the street this afternoon, they either waved back at me like I was a ghost or they didn’t wave at all. At the school, I ran into people I grew up with, parents now, and they looked at me like I’m not real. Then Mrs. Armstrong practically tells me to never step foot in the elementary school again.”

“You really don’t know?” Billy asked.

“I. Really. Don’t. Know.”

“Maybe that knock on the head did permanent damage?” The words may have been in jest, but the look on Billy’s face was serious.

“I really don’t know what’s going on,” Joel repeated.

Billy looked at the sky, ran a hand over mostly nonexistent hair and sighed.

“It’s one thing,” Billy said, “to hurt people by taking what belongs to you.”

Joel opened his mouth. He’d been stifled on the farm, had always felt out of his element, and on top of everything else, Jared didn’t want to share, especially after he’d married, brought his wife to Solitaire Farm to live and had a baby.

But Billy wasn’t done. “It’s quite another thing to hurt people by taking what *doesn’t* belong to you.”

The words hung in the air, an invisible yet tangible barrier between Joel and the stepfather he so admired. It hadn’t been an easy decision, asking for his share of the inheritance, in dollars, instead of pitching in and staying on the family farm. But the will had stated that at eighteen Joel could sell his share. Because of the economy, it was a lot less than he’d expected. Still, Joel taking what was his hadn’t caused the sale of Solitaire Farm; it had only caused a bigger mortgage.

“What? Are you saying the money you gave me didn’t belong to me, because as I see it, having Jared buy me out was the best solution to—”

“I’m not talking about your half of the farm,” Billy sputtered. “I’m talking about the Rodeo Club Fund.”

Joel leaned forward, perplexed. “What about the RC money?”

Billy’s expression took on a hard edge. “The money that I put in my office after the festival the night you left.”

Joel growled, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. What about the RC money? I remember attending the Fall Festival because it was my last night in town, but—”

“I put it in my office,” Billy said. “The treasurer said he figured we’d made double the usual. I was about to unlock the safe when my cell phone rang. One of the kids had gotten kicked by a horse. I didn’t think twice. I took off.”

That was Billy. He was a hands-on principal, and kids were his top priority.

“I took off,” Billy continued. “About an hour later, I went back to the office. I’d never forgotten that I needed to lock that money away.”

A bad feeling started prickling in Joel’s stomach. This wasn’t some proverbial story that Billy was telling to make a point.

“The money was gone,” Billy said, “and so were you.”

Joel had been sucker punched more than once in his twenty-six years, but never before had he realized that words had more impact than fists.

“You knew where I kept the key to my office, you knew I’d put the money in there, and you took it.”

“I—” Joel opened his mouth in indignation, but finishing the conversation was not to be. They were no longer alone. Beth stood behind the three boys, her hand on Matt’s shoulder.

“Matt’s got a stomachache,” she explained, her gaze going from Joel to Billy and back to Joel. To prove it, Matt held his stomach and doubled over a bit, moaning.

Beth shifted uncomfortably. “Is everything all right? Do you want me to run the boys home?”

“Everything’s fine. Or, at least, it’s going to be,” Billy rushed to assure. His eyes never left Joel’s face. Disappointment battled with anger.

Nothing was all right, not in Joel’s life and apparently not in Matt’s life, either.

Billy looked at Joel for a long moment before saying to the boys, “Let’s head home before your father sends out the hunting dogs.”

“We don’t have any hunting dogs,” Caleb complained.

“Shut up,” Ryan said. He quickly and somewhat apprehensively looked at Billy, but instead of Billy offering the reprimand, it was Beth who chided, “Don’t say *shut up,* say *be quiet.*”

“I might throw up,” Matt added to the conversation. Because of the threat, apparently real, Matt rode shotgun in the front while Joel went in the back with Ryan and Caleb. Beth, with a backward glance, headed for her own vehicle. She clutched her ice cream in her arms.

Why he cared about her opinion so much, Joel didn’t quite know. He needed to tell her, as well as Billy and apparently the whole town, that he was innocent.

No wonder lukewarm didn’t begin to describe the way the town of Roanoke had responded to his return so far. Fundraising for the Rodeo Club Fund was tradition in Roanoke, going back fifty years. The Fall Festival was the Friday before Thanksgiving and put preschoolers on the back of sheep, brought a real carnival with a Ferris wheel and a roller coaster to town, and allowed the high school’s marching band—usually about ten of them—to show off. It was fried chicken on picnic tables and a speech from the mayor.

Next to the Fourth of July celebration, it was the town’s favorite, and the earnings helped with the cost of Roanoke’s annual summer rodeo, where Joel’s first taste of bull riding, at age eleven, led to big dreams and, later, exhilarating reality.

The whole town, as well as his family, thought him a thief. This probably, no, definitely, included Beth—although she hid it better—and her mother.

“Billy,” Joel started. “Something’s very wrong here. I didn’t steal—”

;

“Little pitchers have big ears,” Billy said. The three boys moved, but to prove Billy’s point, Matt covered his ears. Ryan adopted an all-too-familiar judgmental look. One pretty advanced for a boy of eight.

The only forgiving one was Caleb. He clutched a raggedy napkin in one hand, held up two fingers with his other hand and informed Joel, “’Morrow. I be three.”

“How about your truck?” Billy asked, settling behind the steering wheel and starting the van, effectively changing the subject again. His lips were still in a straight line. The smile that usually reached to his eyes was missing. It seemed for his grandchildren he was willing to put on an act and pretend nothing was wrong. Still Joel could only wonder … maybe the question really was, *How soon will your truck be fixed so you can go?*

“I arranged to have it towed to Tiny’s Auto Repair right after they checked me out of the hospital. He wasn’t there. If possible, I’ll stop by tomorrow morning. I think the door will be an easy fix, but I’m a little worried about the front bumper.” Joel didn’t really want to talk about his truck. More than anything, Joel wanted to protest his innocence.

He’d not stolen money from the elementary school’s office, Billy’s office, right before he left town. Thanks to his inheritance, half of the farm, Joel’d had a bank account in the six digits. At the time, he thought it would last forever.

“Tomorrow is Caleb’s birthday,” Matt reminded.

“I won’t miss it.”

If he was invited, that is. He’d not been invited to the house, not really, not by his brother. Billy was acting as the go-between and in just an hour, Joel would be facing a brother who did not want him home. Since Jared’s weapon of choice had always been silence, a literal invitation seemed doubtful.

Chapter Three

Beth's sister didn't even mention how melted the bubblegum ice cream was, just quickly got herself a bowl, grabbed the blueberries and motioned Beth to sit at the kitchen table.

Susan Farraday was a middle child suffering from oldest child syndrome.

"Linda called this morning."

Beth almost laughed, especially when Susan prepared a second bowl of blueberry-covered bubblegum ice cream and placed it in front of her.

"I'm full," Beth said.

Susan didn't say anything, just pulled the bowl back to her side of the table. "Tell me everything."

"About what?"

Susan's eyes narrowed. "Do you mean about *whom?*"

"There's nothing to tell. I went over to Solitaire Farm last night to talk to Jared about Matt. That didn't work. Mom wanted me to drop off some Bible study stuff to Meg McClanahan. I spent some time there eating watermelon and answering a few questions about Trey's homework even though he's not in my class."

Susan looked thoughtful. "Go on."

"On the way home, I noticed this truck ahead of me. It would speed up and then slow down. I was getting scared at first. Then I started trying to place it. I knew I'd seen it before. Finally, it really sped up, ran off the road, across the irrigation ditch and right into the McClanahans' fence."

"When did you realize it was Joel?"

"I think the moment I saw it, but I just didn't believe. Then, when I looked into the truck bed, his gear was back there."

"How is he?"

"He seems to be fine. He even helped pick up the boys from school."

"Does he look the same? Or cuter? Did he say anything about what he's been doing? I wonder if that means Jared's letting him stay?"

Beth thought back to the Ice Cream Shack and how tense a conversation she'd interrupted. They'd been talking about the RC money. "He was out of it while I drove him to the hospital. The only thing he said was that his head hurt. And I'm pretty sure he's staying, but last night he was sure leaving in a hurry. So, I doubt this visit is getting off to the best of beginnings."

"Is that all it is, a visit? Do you suppose he ran off the road because he and Jared had a fight?"

Beth had already considered that scenario, and it seemed plausible enough.

"Guess you'll know more tomorrow," Susan said. "Aren't you going to Caleb's birthday party?"

Beth had been there for all of Ryan, Matt and Caleb's special moments. As Mandy's best friend, she was a quasi aunt. A few minutes later, she headed for her car, grateful that Susan had failed to notice that Beth hadn't answered one of her previous questions.

Does he look the same? Or cuter?

Beth could never admit to her sisters that she thought Joel McCreedy looked even better than he had eight years ago. They'd known about her crush and had teased her without mercy. Susan might be seven months pregnant, Linda might own her own beauty salon, but that didn't stop them from ganging up on their baby sister, especially when it came to matters of the heart.

Especially when the matter of the heart had an arrow aimed at it, but not from Cupid's bow. Patsy Armstrong, aka Mom, was the sharpshooter in question.

The McCreedy men, all six of them if you counted stepfather Billy Staples, were having hot dogs for dinner. The kitchen hadn't changed all that much, except that Joel didn't know where he

belonged. The table, from his childhood, was a six-seater, and Joel was pretty sure that the only vacant chair had at one time belonged to Mandy.

His sister-in-law had suffered with a long illness, was six months gone, and Joel hadn't made it to the funeral. He hesitated, and Billy came to the rescue. He got up, moved around the table and took the empty seat. Joel took Billy's place feeling like he kept winding up with the losing hand in a game with rules he didn't understand. Jared's and Matt's faces bore identical scowls when Joel sat down.

"So, what happened in school today?" Billy asked, unable to hide a look of resignation.

Matt didn't answer; he seemed to be contemplating.

"Were dere birfdays?" Caleb wanted to know.

Matt shook his head, but Ryan said, "There were no birthdays, but Trey took the bracelet that Mary got for her birthday and Mary had to chase him all around the playground."

Joel thought he saw a slight smile hit Jared's face, even though Jared didn't seem willing to add to the conversation.

"How about you?" Billy encouraged. "Did you see Trey chasing Mary?"

"No," Matt admitted, "but I saw him get in trouble. Miss Armstrong made him sit out the rest of recess."

Ryan and Caleb finished their food within minutes. Ryan took out a homework paper. Caleb went into the living room to admire the two giant bags of birthday decorations that he promised not to touch. After a moment, Ryan shouted, "Done!" and headed for the living room to tease his little brother about the birthday present bandit.

Billy looked at Matt, who'd taken two tiny bites of his hot dog and totally ignored the fries. "You don't need to clean your plate tonight."

Joel couldn't tell who was more surprised: Matt or Jared.

Maybe Matt. He looked at his grandpa without moving.

"Go ahead," Jared urged, adding to the conversation for the first time.

Still, Matt dragged his feet. Finally, Jared held up a finger. "One." Then up went another finger. "Two." Matt's plate made it to the sink on four; he made it out the kitchen door on five.

Without the boys, the room took on an uncomfortable quiet.

Billy didn't waste a minute. In a serious tone, he began, "Joel and I were talking after I picked up the boys. We didn't get a chance to finish."

Jared didn't even question about what, just gave Joel a suspicious and unwelcoming look.

"First," Billy said, "why don't you tell us what brought you home."

The expression on Billy's face didn't change. He'd been a principal for more than forty years and told anybody willing to listen that "he'd seen it all." He'd been a successful principal because while he'd seen it all, he was still willing to listen.

Jared didn't say anything. His lips were puckered in a straight line that Joel recognized. He didn't really care what Joel had to say, just wanted Joel out of here and for things to go back to normal. Listening to his little brother was so low on his list of priorities that it wasn't a priority at all.

"I should have stayed in New Mexico." Joel didn't mean it, though. Something about being in his childhood kitchen, seeing the school papers held by magnets on the fridge, and sitting at the table where he'd helped his mom make cookies and in turn his mom had helped him with homework, something about it all made him catch his breath and consider what he'd given up.

"You keep up with my career?" Joel asked.

Jared shook his head, but Billy said, "You've been a midlister for quite a while."

A midlister, not a rodeo term but definitely a retired teacher term, felt like a grade of C. "I'm only eight years in," Joel said. "I still have at least ten years of competition ahead of me."

Jared gave a half snort.

"The highest standing you've managed to reach is fifty," Billy said.

"And that kind of standing has earned me enough money to stay in the show even after the seed money was spent."

Jared tensed. The seed money might have been Joel's half of the farm, but in Jared's mind, the farm needed it more than Joel.

Billy held up his hand, halting the dialogue. "This is not the conversation I meant to have. What exactly brought you home? I read that you were injured, but I don't recall which rodeo or what happened."

"I was in Lovington, New Mexico, just over a month ago. I did fine, came in third and took home a purse of just under two thousand dollars. I was supposed to meet up with some friends in Missouri after that, but the morning I was to leave, the Monday after the rodeo, I had a hard time getting out of bed. I was as stiff as I'd ever been."

"You came in third, so you kept your seat," Billy remembered.

"That I did. The only thing I can figure is I must have landed wrong, hurt myself and not even realized it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I went to bed fine, woke up stiff that morning and by evening, a buddy literally carried me to the truck and drove me to the emergency room. I've never hurt so much. I couldn't move to the left or right without nauseating pain. Doctor there said acute lumbar strain and vertebrae damage. For a solid week, I was in bed, in a lonely motel room. After that, I started physical therapy, and everything seemed to be going great. I could bend, jump and even lift. Then, after about two weeks of that, I was walking toward the motel room and I can't even describe what it felt like, except that my back did a little break-dance of its own without my permission. Just like that, I was back in bed and on pain pills. After a week, I realized I couldn't do it on my own."

"And that's when you decided to come home," Billy figured.

Joel looked at Billy and then at his brother. On Billy's face was an expression of concern. Jared's face, however, remained suspicious.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"You were right to come home," Billy said.

Looking at Jared, Joel continued, "This is truly the strangest injury I've ever had. One day I feel like I could possibly jump on the back of a bull and do the eight-second ride, the next day I'm wondering if I can make it to the bathroom."

"So basically," Jared stated, looking at Billy and not at Joel, "he's coming home because he needs help but he can't be of any help."

"I—" Joel started.

"—always have a home here," Billy said firmly. "I won't lie. I'm having a hard time forgiving how you literally ran away, how few times you called and how you never came home when we needed you."

"I didn't find out about Mandy until it was too late," Joel started. "I would—"

"No excuses. We're done." Billy looked at Jared. "The Bible's very clear. It's about time you dust yours off. Joel is family, and Jesus clearly states in the fifth chapter of First Timothy that *'if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.'*"

Jared did not look repentant. "The Bible also says, *'Thou shalt not steal.'*"

Joel felt his teeth clench. What was most amazing was that in eight years, the family had so tiptoed around this ridiculous accusation that it was the first time he'd heard of it. "I didn't steal."

"Joel was about to tell me his side of what happened to the RC money," Billy spoke up, "but then Matthew got sick to his stomach and Beth Armstrong interrupted us."

"I can't believe you think I would steal money."

"It's no secret that you thought your half of the farm was worth more," Jared said.

"True, but I also thought—okay, dreamed—that I'd be looking at career winnings of over a million dollars. You heard me say that for years. I got my Professional Rodeo Cowboys' Association card right before I left. I believed so strongly in my dream. Plus, you knew I felt guilty taking what I did. That's why I left the way I did."

"Every little bit helps," Jared quoted their father.

"I didn't take the RC money," Joel said again, not that Jared was listening. Billy, though, finally looked a little more thoughtful than stoic.

"Twelve thousand, three hundred and seventy-four dollars," Jared stated.

"You have the amount memorized?" Joel asked, incredulous, looking at his big brother.

"Of course I do." Jared stood. Carefully, methodically, he put his dinner plate and glass in the kitchen sink. Then, as he walked out the door, he added, "I reimbursed the club so they wouldn't press charges."

Outside, the whir of a combine penetrated the murkiness that made up Joel's slumber. He kept his eyes tightly closed, hoping the headache would disappear and sleep would return. It didn't.

The bed was harder than it needed to be, but maybe that was just an effect of the pain in every bone in Joel's body. Especially his head. Great, until the night before last the only thing that hadn't hurt was his head. Opening one eye, Joel winced and took in his surroundings and noted the time. Wide awake at seven on a Saturday morning. Who needed an alarm clock? Pain worked better and didn't offer a snooze option.

He slowly opened the other eye.

The guest room hadn't really changed in the last fifteen years, not since his mother had decorated it in a fit of Martha Stewart enthusiasm and a good crop year. Both his parents were gone now—his dad while Joel was still in elementary school to a tractor mishap, his mom to cancer the year he turned eighteen. When she died, Joel lost his footing. The only thing he'd wanted was to leave because he no longer felt like he belonged.

But maybe he'd left because it hurt to belong.

Their memory dimmed as Joel eased up to a sitting position. He managed to get one leg to the ground, and while he rested he stared at the only thing new in the room, a sewing machine. It must have belonged to Jared's late wife, Mandy. Come to think of it, right before Jared's wedding, there'd been a bunch of Mandy's friends gathered in the living room doing something to the curtains with those plastic things that came with cola six-packs. Two years later, right before Joel left, Mandy and her best friends had been sitting in the same living room, the one that now had prettier curtains, making baby blankets.

Had Beth been there? He tried to remember and finally, after thinking of all the times he'd hung around with Beth's sisters, a memory surfaced. She'd been there, but not to sew. She offered advice a time or two, but just as often as not, when Joel came through the room, she'd been reading. He remembered now.

No wonder he hadn't realized what a beauty she was. She'd been so young and always had her head down with her nose stuck in a book.

He put both hands, palms down, on the bed and pushed. He stood, winded and then sat down again as the knob on the bedroom door started to turn. He'd left the hospital yesterday feeling good on whatever they'd pumped him full of. Today wasn't going to be such a feel-good day.

He heard a few snickers and maybe some pushing, and finally the door inched open. More snickering and then, as though he'd been pushed, Caleb hurtled in and stumbled to a halt. Two fingers were in his mouth, shoved deep enough to hurt.

"Morning, Caleb," Joel greeted. "Are you being shy today?"

The fingers didn't come out of his mouth and Caleb didn't respond.

From the doorway came a whispered command, "Tell him it's time for breakfast. Tell him Grandpa said."

But, as youngest sons are prone to do, this one didn't listen, just shook his head again.

"It's time for breakfast." The door opened all the way and Ryan came in. He gave his little brother a dirty look. "Grandpa said. And Caleb's not shy, he's just being stubborn."

The words may have come from an eight-year-old's mouth, but they were Jared's words, complete with tone. The way Joel had heard them, all those years ago, was more like, "I'm Jared, the oldest. And Joel's off hiding somewhere because he doesn't want to do the real work. He's just being lazy." Real work was driving the tractor, not making sure it worked. Real work was spending eight hours straight harvesting, not spending eight seconds on a bull for a chance at a couple thousand dollars and a buckle.

Jared and Joel had different ideas of fun.

Matt peeked through the door, not willing to enter, but not willing to miss out on what was happening. "Matt *is* shy," said Ryan. Matt neither disagreed nor entered the room.

"I'm three." Caleb took the two fingers from his mouth and held them up.

"He's three," Ryan agreed. "And after we eat, Grandpa wants you to help set up his party."

Joel managed to stand once again.

"You not staying?" Caleb asked, moving closer.

"Dad says you're leaving soon," Ryan agreed. "And we're not supposed to talk to you except when we have to."

"Grandpa says he's staying," Matt reminded from the doorway. "Until he's better."

"I'm not sure what I'm doing," Joel said.

"He's staying." Grandpa Billy put his right hand firmly on Matt's shoulder. "And you boys are leaving. It's past time for you two to be doing your chores."

Billy hadn't made a sound as he walked down the hallway. Years of being an elementary school principal had taught him how to sneak up on kids. Ryan and Caleb giggled. Matt pretty much harrumphed, sounding more like Grandpa Billy than a mere boy. After a moment, they all left.

Joel put a hand to his head. He wasn't sure if it was his nephews' visit or the passing of time, but his headache was gone. Outside he could hear the tractor shutting down and the boys shouting, "Morning, Dad." At least some things didn't change.

He felt a pull in his lower back, but it was only a dull ache, not a blinding pain that flashed every time he so much as twitched. You'd think the minor traffic accident would have made things worse. Instead, it was just another day of not knowing if he'd be bedridden or moving.

That's what happened with acute lumbar strain and multiple vertebra damage.

He heard the tractor start again and quickly die. He heard another vehicle, too, and at first thought it was Billy driving away. Instead, an engine turned off and someone, maybe Ryan, shouted, "Hey."

Joel went to the window and opened the curtains wide. Max McClanahan II was already heading toward Jared. Joel could just imagine the gist of their conversation.

Max would be saying something like, "How fast were you chasing Joel when he hit our fence?"

And Jared might be saying, "If I'd been chasing him, he'd be gone. How much damage and what's the cost?"

Nope, Joel didn't need any help imagining the conversation happening right under his window, especially when he saw Max extend his arms wide and laugh.

Guess there wasn't just a small hole in that fence. Jared didn't laugh in return. Just shook his head. Joel couldn't believe he'd neglected to get Billy to show him the damage yesterday. Five bucks. That's all Joel had. And, in just a little over the past twenty-four hours, he'd managed to add more hospital bills and now a fence.

"Dad, I gotta go potty!" A small boy opened the door to Max's truck. A little girl tried to scamper behind, but was caught in the seat belt until Billy went over to help her out of it. Max raised a hand, signaling for the little boy to head for the house.

No, very little had changed at Solitaire Farm. True to form, Joel was the last one out of bed. And, by the time he made it downstairs, Max and his kids had already headed back home.

Twenty years ago, Max had considered the McCreedy home as his and popped over on a whim. Jared and Joel had done the same at the McClanahan place. Max's mother was the best cook in Iowa. All through school, Max had been one grade above Joel and one grade behind Jared. He'd been the class clown, always struggling to make it through with Cs, never making first string and he was the first of their group to notice hair loss.

Judging by the smile on his face when he looked at the two kids, none of that mattered anymore. His life was going pretty well. No doubt, in Roanoke, Iowa, quite a lot about his high school friends had changed in the last eight years. They were planting families, growing careers and harvesting community.

They were also all older and wiser, while Joel had just gotten older.

Chapter Four

Saturday afternoon, Beth parked behind a parade of cars and followed her sister Linda across the driveway and up to Solitaire Farm's porch. Susan had wanted to crash the party along with Linda, but the smell of birthday cake made her ill. However, bubblegum ice cream topped with blueberries made her happy. Go figure. Susan enjoyed being pregnant entirely too much.

A banner tied between two ceiling slates promised a Rootin' Tootin' Birthday. The door was propped open with a train, and inside the living room was scattered a handful of parents, more than Beth expected to see. The only parent missing was Jared.

With the way Matt had been acting yesterday, half in awe and half afraid of Joel, Beth didn't want to wait any longer before speaking to Jared. She hated using a kid's birthday party for a parent-teacher conference, but Jared had a knack for avoiding issues.

Mona Gabor smiled and waved Beth over, but Beth pointed to the back door. "Is Jared outside?"

Mona shook her head. "He's down at Solitaire's Market, no doubt hoping a few of the parents will stop and make a purchase or two."

Solitaire's Market had been Mandy's idea. They'd started the roadside store about the time Matt was born. To everyone's surprise, it made money. Beth knew because she'd worked in it many a Saturday, helping out.

The market was just one more thing on Jared's plate. When Mandy was alive, Jared had cared about making sure his family was provided for, but not so that he'd missed being a part of their everyday lives. Now that Mandy was gone, Jared obsessed about work to such an extent that Billy had become his sons' primary caregiver. Beth edged toward the kitchen and a clean getaway. Mona tended to ask a lot of questions.

Before Beth could make it to the backyard, she heard Billy say, "Is there a hole in it?"

"I don't know yet." Joel, standing in the middle of what looked like a deflated hot-air balloon, nodded at Beth as she came out the back door. Then, as if suddenly realizing who she was, sent her a full-blown smile. He was wearing loose jeans and a tight blue T-shirt that had seen better days. He actually looked like he was having fun amid all the chaos.

He was looking at her as if she just added to the fun.

"It came with a repair kit," Billy said, totally missing out on his helper's inattention.

Joel looked at home in the backyard. That shouldn't surprise her; after all, he'd grown up on Solitaire Farm. He stood all handsome and strong looking. She wouldn't have recuperated so quickly if she'd driven her car into a fence and suffered a concussion.

He made no move to patch the inflatable jump house. Instead, he asked, "Did you bring a book to read?"

She was surprised he remembered. "No, I didn't bring a book to read."

He shook his head. "You even read during football games."

"Quit jabbering," Billy ordered, as a little girl ran and hid behind him to avoid being caught by Mona Gabor's three-year-old. "Fix the hole so we can get these kids occupied." A moment later, the Gabor toddler plowed into Billy, almost knocking him to the ground and inspiring Joel to get busy.

Beth watched him, noting the way his hair rippled in the wind, how his body moved—just a bit on the hesitant side—and how easily he fixed the leak.

That was his gift, always, even more than sports. He tinkered, on the farm, at school and at Tiny's garage. All those years ago, when she'd been watching him from afar and thinking he didn't notice her, maybe he had.

A tiny piece of her—one she didn't dare let grow *because of all the what ifs*—felt exhilarated.

In their small Iowa town, high school football rated as one of the top three things to do—right after *go to church* and *take care of the family.* She'd started going to games when she was eleven.

About the time she hit thirteen, she'd had enough. She wasn't going to follow her sisters' Adidas athletic shoes onto the field and wave pom-poms. Being in the limelight never appealed to Beth. Until Joel had made quarterback, she'd sat on the bleachers—there to support both her sisters, who were cheerleaders—with her nose in a book while those around her cheered. Of course, the stadium lights didn't make for easy reading, and it had seemed like every time Beth got comfortable, the bleachers moved. Everyone wanted to stomp their feet in tune with the cheerleaders. If they weren't doing that, they'd stand to either cheer a good call or debate a bad one.

When Joel had made quarterback, she'd read her book but she'd made sure to watch when he played. She'd always considered him worth watching. Only once before had she noticed him watching back. It was the game-winning play, his senior year. She'd seen his teammates lifting him in the air. He'd whipped off his helmet and looked into the crowd.

Right at Beth.

Or so it had seemed.

Then he'd been swallowed up not only by his teammates, but by the cheerleaders, coaches and fans.

And Beth had returned to her book.

Looking at Joel McCreedy now, with the sunlight dancing in his hair and laughter dancing in his eyes, she almost felt weak-kneed. Obviously, schoolgirl crushes didn't go away, even when the object of the crush moved far, far away.

No doubt about it, books were a safer investment than Joel McCreedy. The last time he'd left, he'd not known he was taking her heart. All it would take was one touch, the right word and that full-blown come-hither grin, and everyone would know he could win her heart.

Including her mother.

And since Joel had no staying power, she'd be here in Roanoke picking up the pieces all by herself again.

No, thank you.

Joel straightened, watching as Beth made her way to a group of adults busy setting out the makings for a hot dog and potato chip meal. Her red-and-white-striped shirt topped tight jeans that fell midknee. White socks and white tennis shoes finished off the look.

Definitely a target to follow.

He was careful not to move too quickly. He'd already made a mistake or two today. First, he'd picked up Caleb so he could watch as people parked in the driveway. Apparently, to a three-year-old, watching friends arrive with presents was almost as good as getting to open the presents.

Picking Caleb up hadn't hurt, but putting him down had.

His next mistake was helping Billy put up the jump house. The whole experience had to do with bending over and straightening up—two things he should really only do in moderation or at the physical therapist's office.

Or so said the doctor Joel had visited after getting the diagnosis about the acute lumbar strain. The doctor, a sports medicine specialist, highly recommended, had said over and over, "An injury like this never goes away. One wrong move, awkward turn, and suddenly walking from the couch to the bathroom will take an hour. You'll always have pain, but if you're careful, you can lead a normal life."

Careful meant avoiding the bull; *normal* didn't include the rodeo.

"We have exercises that will help you get stronger," the physical therapist had agreed.

Riding a bull *was exercise* and Joel had always been strong.

"You can still ride," the doctor had emphasized, "but I strongly recommend horses, not bulls, and not in competition, but for pleasure.

"If you do your exercises, especially the stretches," the physical therapist encouraged.

Until just this moment, Joel had been focusing on the things he didn't want to do: Ride a horse instead of a bull. Exercise because he had to. Return, tail tucked under, to Solitaire Farm.

Finding out most of the town thought he was a thief was just one more nail in the coffin holding his dreams.

Right now, though, the only dream he needed to be thinking of was Caleb's. As if in response to that thought, Billy shouted, "I need help!"

Billy's words were more an order; Joel had been doing grunt work from the moment he'd finished breakfast. Getting ready for a three-year-old's birthday party was harder than preparing for an eight-second ride. And, surprise, surprise, Joel had enjoyed every minute—except for the occasional unwelcome stiffness from the ever-present back pain.

Joel also was enjoying watching Beth traipse across the lawn. Joel followed her movements all the way to a group of people and a guy Joel didn't know. She put her hand on his arm and starting talking. The guy nodded and soon what looked to be a serious conversation started. Joel took one step toward her, then another. He stopped when her sister Linda wandered outside and in just a matter of moments landed in the midst of a bunch of her girlfriends—laughing and trying to outtalk each other with animated arm gestures. Joel wondered where Susan, the other sister, was. They usually weren't far apart.

He looked back at Beth. She didn't need to laugh out loud. Ever the little lady, her eyes did the laughing for her. Joel took another step. She might be talking to a strange man, but she was aware of Joel. He knew how to recognize hooded looks and practiced nonchalance.

Every few seconds a kid would come over and wrap his or her arms around Beth's leg.

The woman was now a kid magnet.

As he took another step, he figured that maybe she was a man magnet, too.

He almost felt propelled to join them. No doubt about it. Beth was definitely a Joel magnet.

Without a second thought, Joel joined the crowd of two.

The man eyed Joel warily, not in a tired manner, more with a guarded hesitation. He looked young, too young. Still, when he spoke, he didn't beat around the bush. "So, you're the infamous Joel McCreedy."

"That would be me."

"I hear you went eight seconds against a fence and the fence won."

"Can't help what you draw." Joel stuck out his hand. "And you are?"

Judging by the look in the other man's eyes, Joel recognized competition, a worthy opponent.

"Nathan Fisher. I'm the new youth minister at the Main Street Church. I've been in Roanoke about a year."

Maybe, just maybe, Joel surmised, Nathan might be one of a handful of people who didn't already judge Joel a thief.

Mona Gabor chose that moment to join them. She held her three-year-old balanced on one hip and didn't seem to notice that said child had a messy hunk of birthday cake in his hands and was waving electric-blue-frosting-covered fingers dangerously close to her hair.

Beth gently took the piece, not even noticing when blue frosting dripped on her pants, and fed it to the kid.

"Thanks," Mona said without taking her eyes off Joel. "Did you get any buckles?"

Beth looked curious, too. Funny, all the time he'd been on the road, he'd imagined his family and friends back home keeping track.

Instead, they'd been going about the business of living their lives. "Yes, I won a few buckles."

Her eyes widened. "How many?"

"Fifteen. I've got fifteen buckles." What he didn't add was that you couldn't pay bills with buckles and how quickly his half of the farm money had disappeared. He didn't add that even with fifteen wins, he'd not pulled in any sponsors. Oh, he'd earned more than his fair share of decent-sized purses, too. They'd financed the next rodeo and the next and the next. He'd come close to being part of the crowd aiming to become national champions. Close, however, wasn't a word that meant much

when your belly was empty and you were sharing a room with three other cowboys all comparing the war wounds of their chosen career.

Because serious bull riding was a career. One that Joel had studied for, longed for, lived and ached to return to.

"Have you ever been on television?" Mona today was much the same as Mona eight years ago. She had plenty of questions. He could only hope she didn't bring up the missing money. Or, maybe he should hope she would, so he could proclaim his innocence.

Then he remembered Caleb shouting "I'm three. I'm three!" No, this was Caleb's day.

"Did you ever meet the guy they made that movie about?" Mona asked. "You know, the one …"

There were quite a few rodeo movies, but answering Mona's question would only spur more questions of the same ilk. He decided to head her off at the pass. "Besides the buckles," he continued, "I also met some incredible people, not movies stars, but real people. People who've made a difference, like …"

But she'd already stopped listening. She was just one more person who only cared about the buckles and the headlines, proof that the hometown boy made good. She didn't know or care about the amazing people he'd met. Before Joel could think of something else to say, she turned away and started talking to someone else.

Immediately, his eyes sought out Beth, but she'd disappeared while he'd been musing about the past.

Which left Joel alone with Nathan Fisher, who had the same half smile on his face that little Matt wore most of the time.

"So," Joel, who couldn't stand the silence, said, "how did you get lucky enough to be invited to Caleb's birthday party?"

"My sister baked the cake. She started a catering business. I volunteered to deliver."

Joel figured there was more, so he waited. Sure enough, Nathan continued. Leaning in, he said in a hushed tone, "I was also hoping to get the chance to speak with your brother. Make an effort to personally invite him to church."

"Jared's stopped going to church?" Joel had halfway expected Nathan to say something about Beth, something like "keep away," or, "You look pretty good for a man who wrestled a fence and lost," or at the least issue a few questions like "How long are you staying?"

Before Joel could ask questions, someone shouted Joel's name, and the opportunity was lost.

"Man, it's good to see you. You look tired." Trust his one-time best friend, Derek Livingston, to state the obvious. Clasping Derek's hand in a sturdy shake for the briefest of moments, Joel experienced what he'd expected to experience every time he saw an old friend.

Homecoming.

With Derek, there was a repeat of that welcome. Still, the most Joel could muster was, "I am tired. Good to see you."

"I'm sorry you're back *this way.* I expected you to ride into town in a parade."

"Yeah, well, my parade's over and I should have aimed my float home a long time ago. What about you?"

"I'm doing great." Derek laughed. "And speaking of floats, I help with the annual Roanoke Rodeo Club Parade now. My work sponsors it."

"Work?" Joel shook his head. "You're not working with your dad?"

"You do what you got to do, as you well know. I'm vice president of the Roanoke Bank." Together, the two men scanned the backyard, before Derek finally admitted, "I'd forgotten how it feels to be on the outskirts of town, with plenty of land and animals. Dad sold his place four years ago when he retired. He offered it to me, but I said no. Looking at my kids," Derek continued, "makes me regret that decision."

"Which kids are yours?" Joel asked, not that he needed to. Earlier inside the house, Joel had watched as two black-headed boys, stocky, had already followed Ryan up the stairs to his room and then down the stairs for food and then up the stairs for more playing and then down the stairs for more food.

"Twins?" Joel asked.

"Yep, I have the two boys, and my wife's home with our littlest." Derek's eyes lit up, much the way they had back when they'd been winning football games. "Our little girl's two weeks old today."

So far, everyone—well, everyone he'd run into during the last forty-eight hours—from Joel's past, save Beth and her sister Linda, came with a kid or two in tow. Some were already taller than the fence post.

"Unca, I want up." Caleb crashed into Joel's legs and practically started climbing. Right behind him was a little girl. Caleb didn't really want up; he wanted to get away from the little girl.

"Not right now," Joel said. "Maybe later when everyone's gone and we go inside."

"He'll be asleep the moment the last partygoer heads out," Derek predicted, as his cell phone went off and he headed for a quiet area. Joel could hear the beginnings of, "Hey, babe, is everything all right?"

Derek, unlike Joel's brother, was willing to start up right where they'd left off: best friends.

Closer than brothers.

He didn't even mention the eight years that had passed without a phone call or visit. He didn't mention the missing money.

Joel headed inside to look for Beth. She was wiping frosting from her pants but before Joel could reach her, he spotted Matt standing against the wall. The five-year-old looked miserable and every few seconds he'd raise up on his toes and jiggle a bit.

The bathroom had a line, and Matt wasn't in it. Plus, for some reason, the more-than-a-century-old farmhouse still boasted only one full bathroom on the first floor.

That would have been the first change, had Joel stayed on. He moved toward Matt but stopped when Cindy Turner stepped in front of him. Blond headed, tallest of all the girls he'd run with, she was also the loudest and, yes, the most fun.

"What I want to know," she said, "is how you managed to stay single? What's wrong with all those buckle bunnies?"

He glanced at her finger. She obviously wasn't single, so her last name probably was no longer Turner unless she'd added one of those fancy hyphens to her name.

"I guess I was busy," Joel quipped for lack of any other response.

"No." The word was spoken in a deep, serious voice. The room's noise faded as if someone had turned down the stereo.

Joel stood straighter, even though it hurt, and looked at his older brother.

"No," Jared repeated. "I'm the one who was busy." And then, after he dropped the bomb, he left the room.

"He was busy," Cindy whispered, "and after Mandy died, he made sure he was so busy that when people stopped by, they'd feel guilty for interrupting him. He's even stopped coming to church. If it weren't for the kids …"

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