CHRISTINE
WENGER

THE COWBOY AND THE CEO

Cherish

Christine Wenger

The Cowboy And The Ceo

«HarperCollins»

Wenger C.

The Cowboy And The Ceo / C. Wenger — «HarperCollins»,

Workaholic Susan Collins wasn't the Gold Buckle Ranch's typical visitor–or camp counselor.The high-powered CEO was more likely to write a check to help disabled children than to teach them arts and crafts. For Susan, it was all business, never personal. So the last thing she expected was a rodeo cowboy to ride into the Gold Buckle and sweep her off her feet.Clint Scully was more at home dodging bulls in the ring than charming pretty but prickly executives from New York City. But there's a reason they say opposites attract…and sometimes that reason just might be true love!

© Wenger C.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

The Cowboy and the CEO 6
Contents 7
Chapter One 8
Chapter Two 13
Chapter Three 20
Chapter Four 26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 27

The Cowboy and the CEO
Christine Wenger

www.millsandboon.co.uk
To the bull riders who chase their dream
and to the bullfighters who protect them in the arena.
Please be careful!
A heartfelt thanks to Silhouette editors
Leslie Wainger, Susan Litman Gail
Chasan and Paula Eykelhof,
who made this writer's dream come true.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter One

"I can't spare the time to fly to Wyoming," Susan Collins said to her administrative assistant, Bev Irwin. Susan held up the clipboard that was packed with papers. "Many of these orders require my personal attention."

"It's nothing that we can't take care of." Bev shook her head. "You haven't had any kind of vacation in ages. This would be a good compromise. You can fly to the Gold Buckle Ranch, enjoy their new spa and do a little business."

Susan didn't even look at the pamphlet Bev shoved in her hand, and began to pace. "Look, Bev, I appreciate your concern, but I have a business to run. I'll send one of our salespeople to the Gold Buckle to handle whatever Emily Dixon needs in sportswear for the campers. I'll only charge her half of our cost, or I'll donate whatever she wants. Anything for the kids."

"Mrs. Dixon didn't ask for any donations. All she asked for was you," Bev insisted. "She's heard of the fund-raising you've done for physically challenged children, and wants to see what you can do for her program."

That was flattering, but she didn't raise the money for any accolades. She did it in memory of her sister, Elaine. The money went for research, for any special equipment the kids might need, for tutors and books while they were in the hospital, and for fun. All children needed to have fun. She could help a little with the fund-raising, but she didn't have time for more.

Susan sighed. Surely whatever the owner of the Gold Buckle Ranch wanted could be done by phone, fax and e-mail. She flipped through the papers on her clipboard and paced. Where was the order for uniforms from that high school marching band?

Bev handed Susan another colorful pamphlet. "You're exhausted and you know it. You need a change of scenery, Susan. You need to relax. Besides, Emily Dixon seems like the nicest lady. You'd love her."

"How on earth did she hear about me out in Wyoming?" Susan asked, stopping her pacing long enough to lean against her desk.

Bev smiled. "Mrs. Dixon also liked the fact that your company is called Winners Wear. And she loved our motto—For Those Who Try Their Best. She said that's the very philosophy of the Gold Buckle Ranch. They try to reinforce the same goal to each of their campers—to do their personal best in spite of their handicap. Isn't that terrific?"

Susan nodded. Clearly, Emily Dixon got it.

Bev slid an unopened brochure across Susan's desk and began to unfold it. "You should see all the programs they have for children with different disabilities—Wheelchair Rodeo, the Gold Buckle Gang, Cowboy Quest for emotionally troubled kids who are facing legal troubles…"

Susan barely listened to the litany of programs. She didn't want to turn Mrs. Dixon down, but she had plenty of competent salespeople who could handle this project.

As she looked at her to do list on the clipboard, the page began to blur. Her eyes were tired, scratchy, and she was having a hard time focusing. She didn't panic. Small things. Easily correctible with a squirt of eye drops and another cup of high-octane coffee.

Bev continued to push. "Why can't you just let your very talented staff do their thing and take a break?"

Because Winners Wear was her company, and she had to be involved in every detail, that's why.

But maybe Bev was right.

Bev snapped her fingers. "Uh-oh. None of the other salespeople are free to go to Wyoming. They'll be at the big trade show in Orlando that week."

The twitch under Susan's eye returned. "I forgot about the trade show."

"Susan…" Bev took a deep breath and held up the brochure. "Emily wants you to experience the essence of the ranch so you can develop a meaningful logo. She also wants cowboy-style shirts and jeans to give to the campers for each program. Then she'd like all kinds of other gear to stock a little camp store. She thinks it'll be a good fund-raiser and that the parents, caregivers and all their donors would want to buy that kind of merchandise."

Susan rubbed her forehead, feeling the start of a headache. She liked the fact that Emily Dixon chose her company, and really liked the fact that Emily was so dedicated to helping children.

Her sister, Elaine, would have loved to spend time at a place like the Gold Buckle Ranch.

Susan stood and leafed through the clipboard again, not remembering what she was looking for. "A week is too long."

Truthfully, she was exhausted. If she had enough energy to stand at the window and look down at the street, she'd see people pushing clothes racks from building to building. Vendors would be hawking goods from tables on the sidewalks, and shoppers looking for bargains would be haggling with them for better deals.

There was no place like New York's Garment District, and Susan loved the hustle and bustle and the energy of it all.

She'd started Winners Wear seven years ago, after her mother died. She'd bought this century-old building with the money her mother had left her, her entire savings and a huge bank loan. Then she'd hired the best employees she could find, mostly eager young graduates from the city's fashion and design schools.

It had been a big gamble for her financially, but her sales staff started bringing in contracts—big contracts—immediately.

For most of the past seven years, she'd felt overwhelmed, but it had paid off. She worked hard, but she couldn't take all the credit. Everyone worked hard.

She hated to admit how tired she was. She couldn't do her best when she felt like a pile of scrap material.

Maybe she should go to Wyoming.

"Go and breathe some clean mountain air, boss," Bev said. "You'll come back nice and refreshed and raring to go. Don't worry about a thing here. We'll take care of everything while you're gone."

Susan took in a deep breath and let it out. Maybe it would be a good idea—before she ended up in the hospital herself.

No thanks. She'd had enough of hospitals when her sister was alive.

"Okay. I'll go," Susan mumbled. "Not for a week, though. I'll leave this Thursday and return on Saturday. Then I have to get back here and take care of business."

Clint Scully meandered through the parking lot toward the front doors of the Mountain Springs Airport. Every now and then, he'd slow his pace even more and take a gulp of strong, black coffee from a white take-out cup.

Nothing like a perfect Wyoming day. Not too hot. Not too cold. A warm breeze and a lot of sunshine. A perfect July day to drag out a lawn chair and take a snooze in the sun. He yawned in anticipation of doing just that.

Mrs. D had promised to bake him a blueberry pie if he picked up Susan Collins at the airport. His buddy Jake Dixon had warned him about his mother's matchmaking tendencies and reminded Clint that she'd sent Jake to pick up Beth Conroy, who became Mrs. Jake Dixon, just last year.

Clint swore under his breath. If Mrs. D had any ideas about matching him up with Susan Collins, she might as well spit in the wind.

Been there. Done that. He liked his freedom too much to commit to anyone.

Once inside the terminal, he checked the monitor and saw that Susan's plane had landed a few minutes ago, so he headed for baggage claim.

"Anyone here from the Gold Buckle Ranch?"

He looked around to see who was speaking, and his gaze landed on the prettiest woman he'd ever seen. She was tall, slender and buzzing from person-to-person like a bee in a flower bed.

Clint grinned. That had to be Susan Collins.

Her red-brown hair was done up in some kind of fancy braid. Her dark eyelashes fanned out on her cheeks like paintbrushes. She was as pale as an Easter lily—she looked as though she hadn't seen the warm kiss of the sun in years. She had on some kind of black jeans—designer jeans. A red blouse with a vee-neckline worked for her. The vee wasn't very plunging—just deep enough to make things interesting. Strappy black sandals with a slight heel made her legs look long and slender.

He stifled a wolf whistle and approached her.

Clint tweaked the brim of his hat. "I'm Clint Scully from the Gold Buckle." He stared into magnificent purple eyes. They must be colored contact lenses, he decided. No one had eyes like that. "And you must be…?"

"Susan Collins." She held out her hand, giving him a strong handshake. "Are you here to drive me to the ranch?"

He enjoyed warmth of her touch and the sureness of her handshake. "At your service."

"Thank you." She studied her luggage. "Where's the skycap for these bags?"

"I can get them. There's only two," he said, flexing.

"Oh, no. They are terribly heavy, especially that one." She pointed to the bigger black suitcase. "It's stuffed with samples and a couple of my catalogs."

"No problem," Clint said, lifting up the suitcases. Damn, they were heavy. What else had she brought from New York, the Statue of Liberty?

He managed a smile instead of a groan.

"No problem, darlin'. No problem t'all." He laid on the Texas accent. Ladies from the East usually loved his drawl.

"My name is Susan," she snapped. "And they wheel."

Mmm…Seemed like she wasn't the Texas-drawl type.

"Right this way, Susan. My truck's out front."

He wheeled her luggage and tried to keep up with her pace. She was walking fast, like she was late for a meeting or something.

"I'd like to get a massage after that dreadful flight," she said. "I'm really looking forward to the spa."

The words came out in a rush. She walked fast. She talked fast.

"The spa hasn't been inspected yet. Should be soon, though."

"Inspected?" she asked.

"A father of one of our campers donated the hot tub to the ranch. He said that it'd be good relaxation for the caretakers of the children. Mr. D had it installed on the deck of the Caretaker Hotel by the baseball diamond."

She raised a perfect eyebrow. "A hot tub? But what about the spa? Massages? Facials? Wraps?"

He shook his head and looked confused. "Mrs. D is the only one who calls it a spa. Everyone else calls it a hot tub. I think there's a communication problem somewhere."

Susan closed her eyes. "I came all this way for a hot tub by a baseball diamond?" She sighed. "Wait until I tell Bev."

Clint told Susan to wait at the curb and went to get his truck. By the time he returned, three cowboys were talking to Susan—hitting on her, really. Bronc riders, he assumed, probably on their way to Cheyenne for the Frontier Days festivities. Bronc riders thought they were hot stuff.

"Toss those suitcases in the back, boys," Clint said, interrupting their conversation. They did so, and then went back to ogling Susan.

"Thanks for your help." He shook their hands, in an effort to send them on their way. "Goodbye now."

One of the cowboys pointed at him. "Hey, aren't you…?"

"Yeah," Clint said, always flattered by the recognition. "Yeah, I am."

Clint opened the door for Susan to get in.

"Just who do they think you are?" she asked.

"Just myself." He grinned. "They've probably seen me around—either fighting bulls or hauling my stock to rodeos."

"I see."

She gave a big sigh and checked her watch. She got into the truck, and so did he. He aimed the pickup toward the mountains.

"Mr. Scully, how long will it take to get to the ranch? I'd like to meet with Emily tonight and show her my samples."

"I don't think that'll be possible. Emily will be busy with the kids. Then after dinner, it's popcorn and movie night. We're showing one of the Harry Potter movies. You won't want to miss that."

"I didn't think that the program had started yet."

"This is Thursday. Right?"

Susan nodded.

"Our Wheelchair Rodeo program ends on Saturday morning, and the Gold Buckle Gang will be arriving on Saturday afternoon. It's a program for—"

"Kids who use crutches or braces," she said softly, pinching the area above her nose as if she were getting a headache.

"How did you know that?"

"I read it in the flyer," she said. "On the plane."

He wasn't sure if she was really interested in the Gold Buckle Gang program or if she was getting a headache. He narrowed his eyes as he watched her.

"Make sure you don't miss the big game on Sunday night. We use a beach ball and the batter uses a big plastic bat. We have shortened bases and the cowboys do some clowning around and get the kids laughing and—"

"Sounds like fun," she said. "But I'll probably be gone by then."

She sounded remote, disinterested. He wondered why. "It is fun, but it also serves a purpose. The kids develop balance and maybe exercise different muscles, or maybe rely a little less on their crutches. Or maybe they just get to laugh a little more than usual." Clint grinned. "Wait until you see the horseshoe toss, and the relay races and some of the other events we have at the end of the program that make up the Gold Buckle Rodeo. We give out gold and silver buckles for the winners."

"Buckles?"

"It's a western thing. Rodeo winners have always received belt buckles—like this beauty." He gripped the big gold buckle he sported and tapped it. "National Championship Bullfighting—2006." He was proud of that, and he'd won the competition four times in a row. The competition was getting tougher and tougher every year, but he still had the moves.

He smiled at Susan. "Maybe we'll get you to play a little beach ball–baseball with the kids."

But he doubted she would. Miss New York City seemed to be even more distant.

"No. I can't," she said abruptly. "I didn't know that a program would be starting and the kids would be here. For some reason, I thought I'd be here in between programs." She took a deep breath and looked out the window. "Like I said, I'll be leaving on Saturday. I have to get back home."

She was getting downright frosty, but he still pushed. "Well, you'll be staying at least a couple days. You'll enjoy the ranch and the kids. The kids are the best."

She didn't answer, then sighed. "I'm suddenly very tired, Mr. Scully. It was a long flight."

Just before she turned her head to look out the side window, he could swear he saw moisture in her eyes. Now he felt bad.

“Susan, did I upset you somehow?”

“Oh, no. No. You didn’t. Like I said, I’m just tired.”

That was just an excuse. Something was wrong. She seemed really tense when he talked about the kids. Something was going on.

Clint concentrated on the road ahead, knowing that he’d somehow put a damper on Susan Collins’s arrival in Wyoming.

He usually stayed far away from women like her—rich, successful, city women who had plenty of money but no heart. Women who were just like his former fiancée, Mary Alice Bonner. Hell, Susan looked like she could teach Mary Alice a few things.

But for some reason, he wanted to—needed to—see Susan Collins smile. He wanted to get her to relax, to get rid of the burden weighing her down.

And if anyone could do that, it was Clint Scully.

Chapter Two

Susan didn't want to get involved with the kids. She was afraid it would hurt too much.

She was just supposed to help design a logo and a line of merchandise for the ranch, and that was all she intended to do.

It wasn't that she didn't care. Quite the opposite. She hadn't been thinking clearly when she'd agreed to come here—she wasn't sure she could bear facing a group of children whose pain so reminded her of her beloved sister's.

To this day, she could remember the smells and sounds of the hospital where she visited Elaine, who'd died way too young.

As soon as Emily was available, she'd meet with her to discuss what Winners Wear could offer. Then she'd take her scheduled flight out of Mountain Springs on Saturday morning. Bev had bought her an open-ended airline ticket, thinking that she'd decide to stay and relax and enjoy the spa.

She'd be leaving in two days.

With that decided, she glanced at Clint to see if he was still alive. He walked slow. He talked slow. He even drove slow.

Anyone could see that on this wide-open road without a car or a cop in sight, he could go at least seventy.

She checked her watch. "Clint, how far away is the Gold Buckle?"

"A couple of hours."

"Oh."

He could easily cut that time in half if he'd just step on it. Then again, she doubted that the huge, rusty pickup could go much over the forty miles an hour at which he was currently cruising.

She stole another quick glance at Clint. She had to admit he was handsome in a rugged, outdoorsy way. He had a lazy, sexy smile with a little dimple at the corner of his mouth.

Clint Scully was intriguing.

Maybe it was because he was the first actual cowboy she'd ever met. Certainly, it wasn't because his jeans hugged his strong thighs, or because his legs were so long that he could barely fold them beneath the dash. Or the fact that he smelled like fresh air and warm cotton.

Her cheeks heated, and she rolled down the window a little more. She reached up and swept the hair that had escaped her French braid off the back of her neck, trying to catch some much-needed air.

She stole another glance at Clint and saw the laugh lines around his eyes. His hands were tanned and strong. She studied the sharp crease of his long-sleeved, blue-checkered shirt. His light brown hair stuck out from under his white cowboy hat and brushed the back of his shirt collar. Her eyes strayed farther south.

He sure did fill out those jeans.

"Something wrong?" he asked, glancing over at her and grinning.

"Um…no. Just admiring your truck."

That was a lame recovery, but she'd die of embarrassment if he ever guessed that she was checking him out. She decided to change the subject.

"Why did those cowboys at the airport know you?"

"They've probably seen me working the rodeo events. I'm a bullfighter. That's the new politically correct term for a rodeo clown."

"You mean you toss around a red cape and get the bull to charge you like they do in Spain?"

"Absolutely not." He chuckled. "You've never seen a rodeo or a bull riding event, have you?"

She shook her head. "Not once."

He whistled. "I thought everyone in North America had seen one at one time or another."

"Not everyone."

He made a sharp right turn onto a bumpy road. Susan gripped the lip of the dash so she wouldn't fall over onto him. She thought her teeth were going to rattle loose from her head.

"So what does a bullfighter do?" she asked.

"I protect the bull riders."

"From what?"

"From the bull."

"Just how do you do that?"

"Various techniques, but mostly I'm fast on my feet."

Her heart started to pound as she thought of a huge bull charging him or anyone else. "Are you crazy?"

"Mostly." He shrugged. "But then I think you're crazy for living in New York City, but to each his—or her—own." He paused for a bit then added, "Anyone special going to be missing you back in New York?"

Hmm…She didn't know whether or not she liked the fact that he was asking about her availability. He was nothing like any man she'd ever met, and would be interesting to get to know, but that was all. She had no interest in a casual fling.

"If you're asking me if I'm married, I'm not. Marriage isn't for me. I don't have time for relationships. How about you? Anyone worried that you're going to kill yourself saving cowboys from bulls?"

"No. Marriage isn't for me, either. Most women aren't happy living down on the ranch once they've seen what the world has to offer."

"Sounds like you speak from personal experience."

There was silence. Then he raised a finger from his grip on the wheel and pointed at the horizon. "Bet you don't get sunsets like that back home."

The sun looked like a big red ball stuck between two peaks of lacy black mountains. Slivers of purple and yellow and red shot across the sky, and she wondered how long it had been since she'd taken the time to watch a sunset.

She knew the answer to that—not since she'd gotten too busy building her company.

"We might get sunsets like that," she said, "but there are too many buildings in the way for me to see it from my office or my apartment. Those who live on a high floor can see it."

"What a shame," Clint said, shaking his head. "So what do you do in New York?"

"I make uniforms and sportswear."

"Uniforms? What kind?"

"Everything from high school band to major league baseball and everything in between." She hesitated, and then said with pride, "I own my own company. I call it Winners Wear, and our motto is 'For Those Who Try Their Best.'"

"Nice." He nodded. "I like it. But running your own company seems like a lot of responsibility."

"It is. I really shouldn't have left New York. I have a million things that need tending to."

She fished around in her purse, pulled out her daily planner, slid out a gold pen and reviewed the list of items she needed to discuss with Mrs. Dixon.

She made notes until the light faded. "Could you turn on the overhead light?" she asked Clint.

"Sorry. It's broken. Why don't you sit back and enjoy what's left of the ride?"

She had no choice, now did she? She put her planner away and stared out the window.

They pulled into the Gold Buckle just after sundown. She couldn't see much of the grounds in the dusk, only the welcoming indoor lights of several small log cabins strung along a brook that glistened in the moonlight.

"This looks just like a real ranch," she said.

"It is a real ranch." Clint slowed down and made a right turn. "Mrs. D said to put you in the Homesteader Cabin and that she'll try to come by later to give you a proper welcome, along with something to eat. That all right with you?"

"Fine. Maybe we can have our meeting then."

"I thought you were tired."

"The sooner I meet with Emily, the sooner we can take care of business."

Clint pulled up in front of one of the log cabins, the second one from the end. In the glow of the porch light by the cabin door, Susan could see two rocking chairs. Large pine trees loomed behind the structure. If there were snow, it'd look like a Christmas card. She wondered if the guests in the other little cabins were at dinner or snuggled up inside.

Susan felt a little thrill of excitement zip through her when she caught the scent of horses on the breeze. She remembered the riding lessons she'd taken one summer in White Plains—a gift from her father when she was twelve. Her mother had protested, but her father had insisted.

"Susan needs to have some fun, Rochelle," he'd told her mother in one of his rare moments of strength. "And you know how much she loves horses. I'll take her on the train, wait for her and ride back with her."

Those were the best six Saturdays of her young life. After that, her father was gone again, escorting a tour group to Europe. He never managed to stay with them for very long.

Shaking off the sad thoughts, she gathered up her planner and her purse as Clint turned on the overhead light.

"Must be working after all," he said, giving her a wink.

He'd lied to her. The light never was broken. He'd just wanted her to look at the scenery. He'd manipulated her, and she didn't like that, but if he hadn't, she would have kept her face in her planner and missed the beauty of this country.

Clint got out of the truck. He walked her up the stairs of the cabin, his hand holding her elbow lightly. That was polite and gentlemanly of him. He opened the door with a large key and flicked on the light.

She glanced around the room and spotted a phone. "Can I make long-distance calls?"

"That phone only rings to the main office in case of emergency."

"I can't live without a phone. Thank goodness I have my cell." She flipped open her phone. "Why can't I get a signal?"

"It won't work around here. Too many mountains surrounding us. But Em and Dex have a phone in the office you can use." He gripped the door handle. "I'd better haul your luggage in."

"Where's the bell person?"

"I guess that'd be me. We all pitch in around here."

Susan turned around and found herself forehead-to-nose, toe-to-toe with Clint Scully. He grabbed her elbows to steady her.

His eyes studied her face, and then his gaze traveled down to her breasts. She probably should have been offended, but in truth she was flattered. It had been a long time since a man had looked at her that way. He seemed to see right through her, reaching down to a part of her that hadn't been touched in years. The same heat that had licked at her insides before flared again.

He cocked an eyebrow as if he was wondering what she'd do next.

She held her breath, wondering what he'd do.

It'd been a long time since she'd been with a man, and being so close to Clint reminded her of that fact.

She'd given up on men a while ago. They just couldn't understand that her company came before they did.

Yet Clint was very, very tempting, and very different. If his scorching gaze was any indication, he was as attracted to her as she was to him.

He gave his hat a tug. “I’ll go get your luggage. Why don’t you relax?”

“Thanks, Clint.” She offered her hand, to shake his. “For everything.”

He raised her hand an inch from his lips. “My pleasure, Susan.”

Surely, he wouldn’t…No one did that anymore.

Clint did. A whisper of warm air and soft lips brushed the back of her hand, and she melted like polyester under a too-hot iron.

Clint Scully was one interesting man.

Trying to gather her thoughts, she listened to the dull sound of his boots fade as he walked down the stairs of the porch. Then she explored the cabin.

The walls were tongue-and-groove knotty pine, varnished to a shine. Lace curtains on the window gave it a homey touch. Brightly striped Hudson’s Bay blankets slashed bits of color around the cottage. It was open and airy with high ceilings and chunky log furniture with bright cushions in a Native American arrow design.

A huge stone fireplace took up most of one wall, and a pile of wood was stacked on a circular stand nearby. She looked for the switch that would make the fireplace spring to life.

“It’s the real thing,” Clint said, appearing next to her with her luggage. “I’ll show you how to start a fire if you’d like.”

“I think I can figure it out.”

She thought how nice it would be to sit before a real fire at night and read a book. She hadn’t had time to read a book in ages. That was something else she’d been missing.

“I’ll leave these here, then I’ll see about getting your dinner,” Clint said.

She walked him to the door and felt all warm and fuzzy when he tweaked his hat and disappeared into the dark night.

Susan Collins, CEO, hadn’t felt warm and fuzzy since mohair was in fashion.

Clint grabbed a frosty cold bottle of Chardonnay from the fridge in his travel trailer and set it on the countertop. In three steps, he was inside his bathroom checking his appearance in the mirror above the sink.

Clint bought the thirty-foot trailer from Ronnie Boggs, a down-on-his-luck cowboy who was quitting bull riding. He remembered pulling out his wallet and handing Ronnie more than double his asking price. Ronnie refused to take all that, but Clint wouldn’t take no for an answer and stuffed the money into the tough cowboy’s pocket.

Clint towed it from event to event wherever he was working. He liked the privacy and the quiet, and the fact that he could cook his own meals and relax in his own surroundings. Besides, if he stayed in a hotel, the riders would give him the business.

Whenever he was at the Gold Buckle Ranch, which was every summer and whenever else his pal Jake Dixon needed him, he parked it in his usual spot, deep in the woods behind the cabins. His favorite thing to do was to crank out the awning, sit in a lawn chair under it and listen to the brook as it sluiced over the rocks.

As Clint walked over to the boxes filled with jeans, shirts and work gear from his sponsors, he reminded himself to fire up his laptop and transfer funds. He’d heard on the stock contractors’ grapevine that a couple of rank bulls might be going on auction with a starting bid of seventy-five thousand each. He’d been waiting and watching for those bulls and would pay any amount for them. They’d make a good addition to his stock.

He grabbed a new shirt from one of the cardboard boxes stacked in the corner. Pulling it out of the plastic wrap, he slid off the little white clips and shook out the shirt. Slipping it on, he could still see the fold marks. He puffed out his chest, and the creases faded. Well, he couldn’t do that all night. He’d just have to hope for dim lighting.

He swung by the mess hall and collected a picnic basket loaded with food for Susan's dinner, and soon he was heading back to the Homesteader Cabin to see her again.

Ahh, Susan. She was so tense, so coiled up, she appeared to be about to spring. There was a sadness about her—he could see it in her deep purple eyes. Maybe he could distract her for a while.

He had a feeling that Susan Collins would dig her own subway back to New York when she looked out the window tomorrow morning and saw a couple hundred kids engaged in various activities. She didn't seem the kid type, but then again, he'd just met her. And he wanted to get to know her better.

Clint walked down the dimly lit path from the campgrounds that led to the cabins, a wine bottle gripped in one hand, the picnic basket that Cookie had given him for Susan swaying in the other.

He took the steps of the Homesteader Cabin two at a time and gave a light knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Her voice was slurred, sleepy.

"It's Clint. I brought your dinner."

"Just a minute."

She opened the door and Clint immediately liked what he saw. She'd changed into a dark pink golf shirt. On the pocket was bright embroidery in primary colors—her company logo, a halo of stars surrounding "Winners Wear." Printed underneath that, in bright orange, was her motto—For Those Who Try Their Best. Khaki pants clung to a great pair of hips. On her feet were fuzzy pink socks. Her auburn hair was in a ponytail high on her head, and a pair of gold-rimmed reading glasses were barely hanging on to the tip of her nose.

She held up the latest issue of Pro Bull Rider Magazine. "It was on the coffee table. Interesting sport, bull riding."

He set the picnic basket and wine down on the kitchen table. "You'll have to see it in person sometime."

She shook her head. "I don't know about that."

"I guarantee you'll love it."

"Care to wager that bottle of Chardonnay against that?"

He opened the picnic basket and pulled out several items wrapped in waxed paper. "You know, we've had a few bull riding events at Madison Square Garden."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding. Now, grab a chair and let's see what Cookie made for us." He opened one of the bigger packages. "Roast beef sandwiches."

He kept unwrapping and found pickles, a container of macaroni salad, two apples, potato chips and a couple of cans of cranberry-grape juice.

"Cookie thinks of everything," Clint said.

"What's his real name?"

"I don't know, actually. Every cook is called Cookie. It's a throwback to the chuck-wagon and trail-drive days." He held up the bottle of Chardonnay. "Some wine?"

"Why not?"

Clint opened the wine and found a couple of glasses in the cabinet next to the sink. Filling them halfway, he handed one to Susan. "Here's to your stay at the Gold Buckle Ranch."

"Thank you." They clinked glasses. "You like it here, don't you, Clint?"

"I do. I love the kids. They have a lot of heart and what we cowboys call try. The volunteers that come every year are special people, and the Dixons are the epitome of try. I see that you have the word in your logo."

"Emily liked my logo, too. That's why I'm here, I guess. But I can't take all the credit. My mother and I came up with our motto, theme, mission statement, whatever you want to call it when we were making nurses' uniforms in our kitchen. Trying our best is what got us through some tough years."

"And now you're the CEO of your own company." He shook his head. "That took a ton of 'try.'"

The way her eyes brightened and the way she smiled, he could tell she was proud of herself. She should be. But there was still that haunting sadness in her eyes.

They ate and talked about nothing in particular and everything in general until he noticed that she was trying to stifle a yawn.

He was just about to leave when Mrs. D came up the steps of the Homesteader Cabin.

"I saw your light on, Susan, and I wanted to stop by and welcome you to the Gold Buckle Ranch," Emily said. "Evening, Clint. Did you see to our guest?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I knew you would." She flashed him a teasing smile.

"Emily, do come in." Susan stood, looking for her sample books. "Would you like to talk about the merchandise now?"

"Heavens no, sweetie. It's late and you must be exhausted. I just wanted to welcome you and make sure you have everything you need."

Mrs. Dixon enveloped Susan in a big bear hug. Susan closed her eyes and looked uncomfortable at first, but Emily didn't let go. Eventually, Susan's tense expression turned into a big grin.

And Clint realized that Susan seemed to need just such a hug.

Emily was about Susan's height, and was one of those women who perpetually smiled. She wore her brown hair short, tucked behind her ears, and she seemed like a bundle of controlled energy.

Emily took a couple of steps into the Homesteader Cabin. "Maybe I will come in for a minute. It's been a stressful day—nothing big—just a bunch of little things."

"Anything I can help you with?" Clint asked.

Emily made her way to the living room and sat down on the couch, clearly exhausted. "I don't think so, Clint, but thanks, anyway. My biggest problem is that my arts and crafts teacher had to leave tonight. She was going to chaperone on the trail ride, too. Her daughter is having a baby, and it's coming earlier than they thought."

"I hope you find someone," Susan said.

"Me, too. I'd hate to cancel the arts and crafts program next week when the Gold Buckle Gang program begins. The kids just love making things and taking them home as presents."

"How about someone from town?" Clint asked.

"I've already put out feelers, but so far, there have been no calls, and I'm running out of time. Beth wanted to help—" She turned to Susan. "Beth's my daughter-in-law, Jake's wife. But she's due to deliver her baby in a couple of weeks, and the doctor wants her to stay off her feet."

Susan knew she should offer to help, but she'd be leaving in a couple of days herself. Besides, she truly didn't know if she could handle working with the kids in such close proximity.

She'd kept her charity work at a distance by donating money and by organizing and running fund-raisers. She did everything she could for handicapped children in Elaine's memory. But she had never worked with children on a one-on-one basis. She didn't think she'd ever be able to face that pain.

"Well, this is my problem," Emily said to Susan. "I didn't mean to burden you with it on your first night. You're here to relax and enjoy our spa. It should be operational soon. You're staying with us a week. Right, Susan?"

Susan bit back a smile at the spa reference. She now knew that it was a hot tub on a deck somewhere. "Don't worry about the spa. And, Emily, I'm sorry, but I'm only staying for a couple of days."

As he listened to the women chatting, an idea struck Clint—one that guaranteed him more time with Susan. Clint snapped his fingers. "Susan, why don't you take over the class. You'll be great. The kids will love you. Stay the week."

Emily smiled. "Oh, Susan, that would be wonderful! I don't think the classes would take up too much of your time. Just Monday through Friday—two hour-long classes a day."

Susan's mouth went dry, and she felt an uncomfortable lump in her stomach. She had to convince Emily that she wasn't staying for an entire week. That she'd planned on leaving the day after tomorrow.

"I don't know if I'd be that great with the kids," Susan finally said.

"Sure you would." Clint winked at her. "And I really love your company's motto—For Those Who Try Their Best." He raised an eyebrow, pointing to the logo on her shirt. He gave her the thumbs-up sign.

Oh, he was sneaky! She could see through him like cheap gauze. He had thrown her own motto back at her.

"Oh…Emily. Okay. I'll do it," she heard herself say. "For the whole week."

"You are a darling!" Emily gathered her into another big hug. "Thank you so much."

Thanks to Clint and his cute dimple and turquoise eyes, she'd just volunteered. To be a teacher. She didn't know how to teach. She didn't know anything about arts and crafts. She'd made a key chain out of braided boondoggle once, if that counted.

Emily walked to the door. "I'll rearrange my schedule to give us some time to plan. Are you also willing to chaperone on the overnight campout and trail ride, too? If not, I understand. I'm already taking too much advantage of you."

She looked at Clint. "I-I'll do it."

What was she doing? The words were just coming out of her mouth. Maybe she was just overtired. She'd never acted like this.

"Susan, do you know how to ride?" Emily asked.

"Not really, but I took some lessons when I was twelve."

"Clint will refresh your memory. All of our horses are very gentle. And I promise that classes will only be for an hour or two each day. That'll leave you plenty of time for yourself."

Emily put an arm around Susan. "I can't thank you enough for volunteering. Now, you get some sleep. You've had a long day, and Clint will be here early to take you to breakfast at the dining hall and give you a riding lesson. Good night—to both of you."

With a wave, Emily was gone from the cabin.

Susan headed for the couch and sat down. She'd never backed down on a promise, and she didn't intend to start now.

Clint sat opposite her on the coffee table. "That was a really nice thing you did, volunteering to help Mrs. D."

"I think you were the one who volunteered me, Clint Scully. My volunteering would have made more sense if I knew something about arts and crafts and riding." She smiled to take some of the sting out of her voice.

"I believe you'll be a wonderful teacher." He stood and tweaked his hat.

She just loved it when he did that. And how could she be mad at him when his eyes sparkled like that?

She'd be mad enough later when she thought about it. Mad at herself. Clint had outwitted her, and it had been a long time since she'd had the rug pulled out from under her.

Maybe she really did want to stay.

Chapter Three

How could she even think such a thing?

Stay here? She'd been counting on doing business, with a relaxing spa weekend on the side—not playing teacher at a kids' camp. But here she was—trapped. And it was her own fault for volunteering.

"Susan, I'll help you with your classes anytime. Day or night," Clint said.

Now, that was a loaded statement. Clint was a flirt, and she was very rusty in the flirting department.

Standing, she walked to the door. Clint got the message and sauntered over to her. "I'll be sure to call on you if I need you," Susan said, then waited a few beats. "Day or night."

He grinned. Tweaked his hat. "See you in the morning."

She could hear the thud of his boots as he walked onto the porch and down the stairs. She locked the door behind him, then sat down on the couch.

She had to think of something besides Clint. The cowboy was getting under her skin, making her stomach flutter and her heart do little flips in her chest. For heaven's sake, she was a businesswoman, not a freshman in high school.

Don't think about him. Think about your class.

She'd just promised Emily that she'd teach arts and crafts, but she didn't have a clue as to how to begin. Or even how to relate to the campers.

She'd never been a child herself.

But she never broke her word, not where kids were concerned. She'd been just about to tell Emily that she was only good at writing checks, when the "I'll do it" had come rocketing out of her mouth—not once, but twice.

So she'd try to make her arts and crafts program a success. She would develop it like a business project with a workable plan, realistic goals; set some milestones and plot it all out.

With that decided, she walked over to the refrigerator, suddenly dying for a hearty gulp of leftover Chardonnay.

Her reflection in the window caught her by surprise. It was so dark outside. No streetlights, no marquees, no car lights or skyscrapers lit for night. No TV. No radio. Just darkness and silence. With this kind of peace and quiet, she'd die of boredom within fifteen minutes.

Unless she had a certain cowboy to amuse her.

Reaching in her purse, she took out her cell phone to call Bev at home and check on things at Winners Wear, but then she remembered the time difference. Bev was probably fast asleep. Checking her cell, she saw there was still no signal. With a sigh, she tossed the cell phone back into her purse.

She paced. She sipped some wine. She paced some more. Sipped. Paced. Sipped. Paced. Sipped.

Finally, she decided that she should try to get some sleep. Maybe in the light of day, she'd find her lost mind.

She checked to make sure the door was locked, then for a little extra security, she pushed a heavy chair against the door. She missed her myriad locks, dead bolts and chains.

Back in the bedroom, she changed into a pair of sweatpants and a long white T-shirt, and eyed the puffy comforter on the bed. Slipping inside the covers, she sighed as the delicious warmth enfolded her. The bed was perfect. Now for some sleep.

She turned the light off and couldn't believe how dark and quiet it actually was.

There was no glare from the streetlights. No angry blare of car horns or revving motors. No shouting.

How did people live like this?

Staring up at the ceiling, eyes wide open, she tried to will herself to sleep, but Clint Scully kept intruding on her thoughts.

Cowboy. Handsome. Turquoise eyes. Boots. Sideways smile. Little dimple on the side of his mouth. Excellent butt.

She smiled and snuggled deeper into the bed when she heard a fluttering noise and felt the slightest breeze against her face.

"What?"

She thought that maybe the noise was a squirrel on the roof of the cottage. Did squirrels come out at night? What if it was a mountain lion or something with lots of sharp teeth? After all, this was the wilderness.

Something fluttered. And then again. Whatever it was, it was in her room.

Holding her breath, she flicked on the light and picked up her purse for protection.

A black bird flew by.

No. A bat!

She screamed. It flew by her face. She screamed again. Then again for good measure.

She sprang out of bed and tried to remember what she knew about bats.

Absolutely nothing.

She swung at the thing with her purse, ducking and dodging. The bat flew into the living room. On shaky legs, she turned on every light that she could find.

She screamed and swung again as it flew by her. She heard a series of knocks at the door—or perhaps it was her heart pounding against her chest.

"Susan? It's Clint. Susan, are you all right?"

What a stupid question. "No, I'm not all right. There's a bat in here!"

The door rattled. "I can't get in."

On wobbly legs, she managed to run over and unlock the door so Clint could squeeze in.

"Where is it?"

"Over by the fireplace."

Clint squinted. "That little thing?"

"It's a bat! Do something!"

"I will."

He moved her away from the door. The bat flew out. He closed the door. "Gone."

Her head became a little woozy and she couldn't stop herself from swaying forward.

Then the shock of something cold and wet splashed on her face brought her around.

She gasped. "W-what are you doing?"

"There was a glass of water on the table, and I—"

"I know what you did, but that was wine."

Clint grinned. His eyes didn't move to meet hers, but were riveted to her chest.

She looked down. The wine had made the fabric of the white T-shirt cling to her breasts.

She rolled her eyes and plucked the material away from her body.

"Thank you for getting rid of the bat. Good night."

She stood up to reach for a blanket, but her knees wouldn't hold her yet. Just before they gave out completely, Clint caught her.

She let him hold her, enjoying how his hands roamed over her back and how warm his chest felt against her wet breasts. How his hard body felt against her.

Suddenly nervous, she stepped back, grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around herself. Disappointment dimmed his eyes.

"How did you happen to be here?" she asked.

"I walked Mrs. D home and was just going back to my trailer when I heard you scream. Actually, I think they heard you up in Canada."

She laughed. “Thanks, Clint. I’m glad you were here. I’ll be okay now.”

“Do you want me to stay with you? I’ll take the couch.”

Actually, she did want him to stay, but she just couldn’t deal with knowing that Clint was in her cabin. She’d never sleep.

“No, thanks. I’m just going to sleep with all the lights on. It’ll make it feel more like home.”

He grinned. “Suit yourself.”

He walked to the door, opened it, locked it again, and the cowboy disappeared into the dark Wyoming night.

The next morning, Susan awoke with the sun shining through the lace curtains. She swore she could see her breath in the frigid cabin.

She pulled the quilt off the bed and wrapped it around herself. Then she searched the bedroom for a thermostat so she could turn up the heat, but there was none to be found.

From habit, she slipped on her watch and checked the time. Eight o’clock. She hadn’t slept this long in years. If she’d been home, she would have already put in about two hours at work.

She’d slept so soundly. Maybe there was something to this “clean mountain air” thing after all.

She tightened the comforter around herself, yanked on her fuzzy pink socks and walked into the living room.

She found the thermostat next to the fireplace, set it at seventy degrees and sat on the sofa, tucking her feet under her to warm them. It felt like December in New York instead of July in Wyoming.

She looked out the window in front of her and saw a kid go by on a horse. He had braces on both legs, and he was grinning and looking around as he rode, like a king surveying his realm. A cowboy walked beside the big horse, and her heart did a funny leap in her chest, thinking of Clint.

Control yourself, Susan.

She heard footsteps on the porch and soon heard a knock on her door.

“It’s Clint.”

In spite of trying to be in control, she felt her heart do a funny leap anyway. “Come in,” she said. She knew he had a key.

The door opened, flooding the room in sunlight. She squinted at Clint.

“It’s colder in here than it is outside. Why didn’t you open the windows?”

“I never thought of that. That’s not the usual way it works.”

“That’s the way it works around here.”

He walked around the cottage and opened the windows. Sunlight and warmth filled the room. She loosened the comforter. He was right. It was warmer outside.

Clint sat opposite her on a big leather chair and propped an ankle on his knee. “How’d you sleep after the bat?”

“Like a rock. I put the covers over my head and didn’t move a muscle.”

“Did you forget that we have a breakfast date?”

He studied her with a grin, and she knew she must look a sight. How come he looked so good in the morning? Judging by the crease marks on his long-sleeved pink shirt, it looked like he’d just taken it out of a package. His jeans were dark denim and also looked new, and he sported a belt buckle the size of a saucer.

He looked bright and chipper, and she felt as if she’d been run over by a double-decker tour bus. Life just wasn’t fair.

“And don’t forget your riding lesson,” he said. “I only have one day to make a cowgirl out of you.”

She hadn’t forgotten, but hoped he had.

“Let’s get moving—we’ve got a long day.”

What happened to the check-his-pulse, laid-back cowboy from yesterday?

"Is there coffee in the dining hall?" she asked.

"Buckets of it."

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," she said, springing up from the couch and running to the shower.

She figured she'd just get some coffee to go and maybe a bagel with cream cheese. Her stomach was jittery enough from the bat last night and now she had to get up on a horse and try to ride? It'd been ears since she'd been on horseback.

When she was ready, Clint opened the door for her and she stepped out into the bright sun. Halfway down the path and aiming for the biggest building, she heard a shrill whistle.

Looking around she realized that Clint hadn't budged from the porch of her cottage. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"I always like the view from here."

Curious, she walked back toward the porch and stood a few feet away from him, following his gaze to the mountains in the distance. Yes, they were beautiful. Not something she'd see back home.

She noticed several more buildings on the grounds. A long, wooden building had saddles hooked over the railing that surrounded it. To the left was a barn with a corral. The smiling boy she saw earlier was brushing his horse there. The cowboy who'd been with him sat on the wooden fence, watching.

"Smell that air," Clint said. He took a deep breath.

She did. The scent of pine drifted on the air, but she'd rather smell coffee. "Which building is the dining room?"

He pointed. "Hang on a minute."

He gave a shrill whistle and waved to the cowboy and the boy. "Morning, Jake. Morning, Tyrone."

They waved back.

"That's Jake Dixon. I guess you could call him the program director of the Gold Buckle. Tyrone is a camper." He walked toward Susan, as if he had all the time in the world.

She groaned. "Coffee. Hurry."

But he didn't hurry. She waited for him and looked around. To her right, almost a city block away, stood a large ranch house that must have been the model for the dozen or so smaller cottages. From the beams of the wraparound porch, fuchsia-colored flowers cascaded from hanging baskets. Pink and red roses climbed on white trellises from a bountiful garden.

On one half of the porch was another set of stairs and a wheelchair ramp. A large sign on the roof proclaimed "Office."

There were still more buildings. Some were weathered, others were whitewashed, and some were stone or brick. It looked like a little village.

Clint arrived at her side, and she felt his hand at the small of her back.

"It's not like New York City, I suppose."

She had to admit it was a pretty setting. "Manhattan looks incredible at night, but here there's such wide-open space and all those trees and mountains. It's breathtaking."

"I never thought you'd notice."

"I didn't, until you pointed it out."

Clint laughed and offered his arm. "Shall we dine?"

She hesitated a moment, then took his arm. "Sure."

He motioned toward a chalet-type building with big picture windows. "That's the dining hall, movie hall and all-round gathering place. And there's always a pot of coffee on, day or night."

The man knew how to get to her—forget the Chardonnay, bring on the caffeine.

"I think I should call my office first and see how things are going."

"You've only been gone a day. Let's eat first."

"But I've never been gone a day before."

He shrugged. “Give them some space. Maybe it would show you trusted them.”

Maybe he was right, but she was still going to call.

As they walked, Susan was very aware of his presence. She could feel his taut muscles beneath his shirt. The sound of his boots against the hard-packed ground reminded her of a hundred old western movies that her father used to watch on TV—when he was still around, anyway.

She studied Clint. He was clean-shaven, tanned and fit, and he was making her heart beat double time in her chest.

No one she’d ever dated had excited her this much. Admittedly, she’d always gone for typical Manhattan businessmen—stockbrokers, bankers, real estate developers—yet it was this cowboy who intrigued her the most.

Then again, she didn’t really know Clint. Heaven knows that she had more in common with the Manhattan singles. She loved to talk business with them. But none of them were for her. None of them could handle it when she left them waiting at the restaurant or the latest trendy bar a couple of times because she had to stay late at work.

Clint opened the door for her and she walked in. One of the first things she noticed were the long rows of picnic tables lined up end to end. The dining hall was crowded and noisy with a lot of laughter, the clang of china plates and the metallic clicking of silverware.

And full of kids.

Susan’s heart started to ache immediately. Yet these kids were smiling and laughing, yelling to one another. She could hear snippets of conversation about the horses they wanted to ride and what they planned to do during the day.

Black cowboy hats bobbed up and down, like a flock of crows pecking at seed. Every once in a while, a white hat could be spotted in the mix—a dove among the crows.

Under the hats were cowboys and cowgirls of all ages, wearing long-sleeved shirts, denim jeans and cowboy boots.

Uniforms. Cowboy uniforms.

She looked down at her designer clothes and her strappy Italian sandals. Maybe she ought to find a phone and give Bev a call, ask her to send a care package of western wear.

Clint steered her toward the back of the huge room to a cafeteria line, just like the one she remembered from high school. He plopped down an orange plastic tray in front of her and nodded to a tall, thin cowboy behind the counter. He had bristly white whiskers and a black baseball hat that read “Professional Bull Riders.” He wore a gray T-shirt, and on his arms were tattoos of the Marine Corps.

“She wants the works, Cookie,” Clint said.

Before she could tell him that she just wanted a toasted bagel with cream cheese, he handed her a plate heaped with scrambled eggs, bacon, ham and fried potatoes with onions.

“Come back for seconds or thirds if you want ’em,” Cookie said, grinning. “We got more than enough.”

Clint plucked a potato that had fallen off her plate onto the tray and popped it into his mouth. “Every once in a while, Cookie thinks that he’s still cooking for the marines.”

She looked down at her breakfast, floating in grease. “I see that he specializes in low-fat cuisine.”

Cookie handed Clint an identically heaped plate of food.

“The grease makes your hair shiny,” Clint said, leading Susan to an empty picnic table. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Black.”

“Have a seat, I’ll be right back.”

She watched him walk to a round table supporting a coffee urn as big as a silo. Clint could really work a pair of jeans, and she could think of several designers who’d scoop him up instantly as a model, but her major concern was the fact that her coffee would be cold by the time he meandered back.

He finally returned and handed her a steaming mug of the coffee and she took a long sip. The strong, bitter brew slammed against the back of her brain and her eyes watered. She gasped for breath as her toes curled into her sandals.

"Good stuff, huh?" Clint said. "That's cowboy coffee."

She closed her eyes. She couldn't speak.

"You'll get used to it."

She took a bite of bacon. It had a nice smoky flavor and she guessed it was the real cholesterol-laden thing.

"So what are you going to teach in arts and crafts?" Clint asked. "I'll help you any way I can."

She took a deep breath. She didn't want to think about it yet. "Thanks, Clint. I appreciate the offer and will definitely take you up on it."

He nodded and concentrated on his plate of food.

"How come nobody takes their hat off when they eat?" Susan asked.

"A cowboy never takes his hat off," Clint replied. Then he winked. "Well, maybe there's one thing that I'd take my hat off for."

He winked again, and she felt a tingle in her belly. She might be rusty as to the flirting thing, but it was all coming back to her. "You're bald under that hat, right?"

"Like I said, I only take my hat off for one thing, so if you want to find out…"

There was that annoying flip of her heart again.

Before she could think of a witty comeback, she noticed a little girl on crutches awkwardly making her way toward the table. And all she could think of was Elaine, as a pang struck her heart.

How was she going to survive this trip when she couldn't escape her memories?

Chapter Four

Susan couldn't take her eyes off the little girl. She had blond wispy hair like Elaine's, and Elaine's smile, but that's where the similarity ended. Elaine had been much taller and weighed more than this tiny creature.

As the girl got closer, Susan could see that she had braces on both legs. A piece of paper and a pen were crumpled around the handle of a crutch where she clutched it.

She had a big grin as she made her way over to them. "Can I help you with something, sweetie?" Susan asked, trying to ignore her aching heart.

"I want Cheyenne Clint's autograph," she said.

Susan smiled at her. "Cheyenne who?"

The girl tilted her head. "Cheyenne Clint. The rodeo clown. He's sitting right next to you."

"Cheyenne Clint—" Susan laid her hand on his arm to get his attention "—you have a fan here who wants your autograph."

Clint wiped his mouth with a napkin and swiveled to see who was talking to him. "Well, well, aren't you a pretty young lady." He tipped his hat to her. "Cheyenne Clint Scully at your service, little lady."

The tiny girl giggled. "Will you sign your autograph?"

"I'd be honored." Clint patiently waited as she handed him the crumpled paper and a pen. "What's your name, darlin'?"

"Alisa Constance Pedigrew."

Clint gave a high-pitched whistle as he scribbled on the paper. "That's a name for a princess. Are you a princess?"

She giggled again, cocking her head to the side. "No." Her fine, pale hair skimmed the shoulder of her colorful striped T-shirt and then she tossed her head back. She had on a pair of denim shorts that hid the top of where her braces started. She leaned on aluminum crutches with metal armbands.

"Well, I am going to make you the Princess of the Gold Buckle Ranch for as long as you stay here. That okay with you?"

"Sure!"

Clint made Alisa's face light up with pure enjoyment, and that was a real talent.

Clint took off his hat, and Susan saw that he had short, straight brown hair shot with streaks of gold. Mystery solved.

He placed his hat on Alisa's head and said, "I, Cheyenne Clint, pronounce you Princess of the Gold Buckle Ranch."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.