

The Cowboy's Christmas Claim

Chapter One

Ford

"Marcus, you're tying up a calf. Not your girlfriend." The ranch hands around me chuckle as I stride forward to fix the knot he's mangled on the training dummy. As a new hire on the Second Chance Ranch, Marcus is still learning the ropes, *literally*, and proving he can tell the difference between ranch work and foreplay.

He flashes me a grin. "Should've known. The rope's the wrong color."

"More than I needed to know about your sex life." I shake my head as the men around us laugh harder. They're an odd mix of old and new country. Randy's the oldest, but dyes his hair to cover the gray, and Marcus looks like he raided his grandfather's cowboy closet. Tucker, and Aaron—the quietist of the bunch—are somewhere in the middle.

"When you tighten the knot, put tension here and here." I point out the spots and give the rope a tug.

"You brought it up, boss." Marcus winks at his audience. "Not my fault my girl likes being roped by her cowboy. Maybe you should try it."

"He'd have to dance with a woman for more than one song," Randy adds.

"Well, that's never going to happen. Ford hasn't seen the back of a Ford since he lost his virginity," Tucker says.

"Wasn't that last week?" Marcus is grinning so hard his cheeks must hurt.

The guys are laughing their asses off at my expense, and I let them. It's been a rough couple of weeks since Thad's accident. We've been a man down, and if they need to let off some

steam by giving me shit, I can take it.

I dust my gloves on my jeans and adjust my hat against the morning sun, as my breath frosts in the air. A blanket of snow covers the ground, but the skies above are a clear, endless blue over the mountains. Just another cold, December day in Montana. After thirty-five years, I'm still not tired of it.

Turns out, I'm one of the few who feel that way. I could have left a hundred times, but White Falls has my heart.

Maybe that's why the guys are right. I haven't been with a woman in a while. Most of the time, I don't care. But Christmas screws everything up. Makes a man want to think about family and home. The very things I *don't* want to linger on.

Randy slaps me on the shoulder. "Want me to put in a good word with Santa, Boss Man? Maybe he'll wrap up something pretty for under your tree."

Tucker snorts. "Been sittin' on Santa's lap lately, Randy?"

"Hell no. He's been sitting on mine."

The guys laugh even harder at that, and the teasing turns to Randy. They're so rowdy, they miss the truck pulling up.

It's the ranch's owner, Caleb Dalton. He crosses the yard, his gaze sweeping over the men lounging against the fence rails—and Marcus, who's currently tying Shibari knots on the damn calf dummy.

Caleb's eyebrows raise and our eyes meet.

Yeah, as their boss, I should have sent the men back to work ten minutes ago. Fences don't mend themselves. But the stress of the extra workload, and the increase in equipment breakdowns has had them bickering for days. Laughter is a welcome relief.

"Don't ask," I murmur as Caleb comes to stand beside me.

"Wasn't going to. The less I know, the less I have to explain to Harmony." A smile teases his lips at the mention of his wife. "Between our toddler, the bakery, pregnancy, Christmas, and now this new rental cabin venture, she's stressed enough. The last thing I want her thinking about is—" he waves toward Marcus's intricate knots— "*that*."

"Afraid she'll get ideas?"

"I know she will." He clears his throat, cheeks reddening. "Anyway, I need you to do one more check on the cabin. The guests are supposed to arrive tomorrow. Harmony wants it to be perfect."

This ranch belonged to his father before being passed on to Caleb and his brother. Both had bad memories tied to this place, so neither planned to return. Instead, they hired some local ranch managers to maintain things.

When Caleb finally returned to White Falls, he discovered the group had pocketed the money and let everything rot. He fired them on the spot and has been working ever since to bring the land back to life.

Harmony took one look at the two cabins nestled at the base of the mountain and decided they'd make great holiday rentals.

"No problem. I'll check the generator and the wood pile to make sure it's stocked in case the weather changes." Out here, it can turn without warning.

Caleb crosses his arms. "There's more. Harmony wants decorations put up." He sighs. "Don't give me that look. The woman's pregnant. Last week she wasn't going to decorate at all. Now she wants the entire cottage to look like Santa's Workshop. I talked her down to three boxes."

I eye the three boxes of shimmering hell in the back of his truck bed. "Caleb..."

"Garland mostly. Try to make it look nice. These are her first clients, and she wants it to feel five-star." He pauses, then adds, "Sorry, man. I know how you feel about Christmas. Can

you humor her?"

Shit. I can't disappoint a pregnant woman. Especially Harmony. Looks like I'll be facing a bit of Christmas anyway. "Fine."

"I'll tell her she owes you a cupcake."

Not gonna turn that down. Harmony's cupcakes and pastries are the best in the county.

"Thanks. With all the recent breakdowns and Thad's accident... I don't know. Something feels off. Harmony says I'm paranoid, but I was special ops. I'm getting that prickling at the base of my neck that tells me these things aren't just bad luck. If anything is wrong at the cabin, I know you'll be able to repair it on site before the guests arrive." He motions to the ranch hands still giving each other shit. "These guys are capable, but they're not you, Ford. I swear you can fix just about anything."

Except my family.

I grab two of the boxes and transfer them to my truck. "I'll take care of it."

Caleb hands me the last box and closes the tailgate on his truck. "Got plans for Christmas?"

"No. The animals don't celebrate. It's just another day to them." And me. I'll take care of them so these guys can have time with their families.

Pain pinches my heart at the thought, but I shut it down.

"You should come to dinner. We'll have some of the guys from Solace Ridge out as well." Solace is a rehab service for veterans struggling to bridge the gap between service life and civilian. Those men living up in the mountains are rough around the edges, but they're finding their way.

"Thanks. But I can't intrude on family time."

"You wouldn't be. I've known you since third grade. You're closer than most family."

I nod, but there's no way in hell I'm going. Christmas used to be my favorite time of year. Now, I just want it to be over.

I send the guys back to work, then climb behind the wheel of my truck.

Caleb leans on the door. "You good?"

"Yeah. I'll let you know if I run into any problems at the cabin."

He nods once. "Appreciate it."

I tip my hat, then pull away, tires crunching over packed snow. Time to get this done, then get back to work.

Of course, it's never that easy.

Four hours later, I've repaired a broken porch rail that snapped when the firewood stack avalanched, replaced two burned-out bulbs, and bypassed a faulty sensor on the generator just to make the damn thing work. The three boxes of Christmas decorations sit untouched in the bed of my truck.

Good thing Caleb sent me out here to do a last check on things. Harmony's guests would've gotten more adventure than they'd paid for. Maybe it's all coincidence, but for a cabin that was supposed to be guest-ready, it's a lot of bad luck in one afternoon.

I drive the last nail home on the new railing, wincing as the sharp strike of the hammer bounces off the trees in the cold air. Thankfully, the small shed behind the cabin still had some materials from the renovation, or I would have had to make a trip into town.

I stow the hammer in the toolbox, clean up the mess, and shoot a text to Caleb about the repairs. All that's left are the damn decorations.

This is for Harmony.

I trudge toward the truck, tugging my hat lower as sunlight glints off the tinsel and starts to fade.

The sound of an engine cuts through the quiet. I look up just as the tires squeal and the car hits the ice. Caleb said the guests arrive tomorrow. No one should be on the old logging road leading to the cabin.

The white SUV fishtails as the driver fights for control. In less than a second, it spins out and crashes through the brush, slamming into a tree in a plume of snow and smoke.

Shit!

I sprint toward the vehicle, every second feeling like an eternity. There's no movement inside.

My heart kicks harder as I approach. The driver turned the wheel at the last second to avoid hitting a tree head-on and landed in a shallow ditch. The damage is mostly on the right side, but I don't stop to inspect it.

Racing to the driver's door, I tug the handle.

It's locked.

Inside, a woman is holding her head, looking dazed.

I tap the window to get her attention. "Hey! Unlock the doors so I can help."

She turns toward me, blinking like she's not sure I'm real, then reaches for the door handle.

The moment the latch releases, I tug the door open and crouch beside her. The scent of fresh berries washes over me as I scan her for injuries. There's a lump forming under her fingertips, but otherwise, she looks uninjured. Just a little shaken. The airbags didn't deploy, so

she must have hit that tree at just the right angle.

"You're going to be okay. Let me help you." I reach for the seatbelt buckle and look up to make sure she understands.

The bluest eyes I've ever seen meet mine, and for a moment, I can't breathe. Her lips are dewy pink and there's a flush to her skin. Her eyelashes are decadently long, and dark hair falls in long waves over her shoulders.

Christ, she's gorgeous.

My heart thumps hard in my chest, every muscle tensing. My cock pulses in my jeans, and I instinctively lean closer to breathe in that sweet scent.

She's injured, asshole. Stop drooling and help her.

With effort, I get myself under control and release her seatbelt, easing back to give myself some space. I don't know what the fuck that was. Her well-being is more important than figuring it out, but damn...

Another five seconds and I might have kissed her. That never happens.

It's not happening *now*.

"Look at me, honey. You're going to be okay. Can you stand? We need to get you out of here."

She nods, then lifts her hand and brushes her fingertips over my cheek. A second or two passes, and just when I think she's not going to say anything, she whispers, "Ow."

Yeah, she'll definitely have a few bruises. "I have you."

She blinks and sways toward me.

"Easy," I murmur, pulling her against my chest. Wrapping an arm around her, I ease her

out of the car and hold her close. She's trembling from head to toe from shock, cold... maybe both. Christ, she's not even dressed for a Montana winter. The thin pink coat she's wearing wouldn't survive a breeze, let alone the icy wind cutting off the ridge.

I shrug out of my jacket and wrap it around her shoulders. The thing nearly swallows her whole, but at least she'll warm up.

"Stay with me, sweetheart," I say quietly.

She murmurs something I can't hear and snuggles closer, tucking her head beneath my chin.

Every breath I take is laced with berries and crisp snow. She feels damn good in my arms. I know I shouldn't think it, but there it is, along with a strange pressure in my chest. She's wearing my jacket, her curves are pressed against me—*Christ does she have curves*—and her trembling body is raising every protective instinct I have...

"What's your name?" My voice sounds half an octave deeper. What the hell is wrong with me?

"Ember. Ember Davis."

Something sparks low in my gut hearing her soft voice. "That's pretty." *Like you.* "I'm Ford King."

Her sapphire eyes darken, lips curving as she tilts her head up. "Thank you, Ford."

Headlights sweep across the road before I can answer, and a familiar blue truck pulls up behind the wreck. Colby Tucker, one of my ranch hands, climbs out. "Need a hand, Boss?"

"No." The word comes out harsher than I intended, but I don't need *his* hands anywhere near her. Tucker has settled down some since spending a night in jail after harassing Lacey, one of the waitresses down at Gravy Lane Diner. Caleb almost fired him. He's changed some, but I don't want him around a woman as vulnerable as Ember. "I got her. Can you head back and call a

tow truck?"

He glances at Ember, still wrapped in my arms, then back at me. He gives a slow nod. "You got it. She's all yours. I'll let Caleb know."

All mine...

Every muscle in my body locks, and my arms tighten around her. The feelings that flare over his word choice are not any I want to name.

He must sense something is off, because he gives me one last scrutinizing look, then climbs back in his truck.

I watch him drive away, then turn back to the woman in my arms. She's no longer trembling, and I can feel the warmth of her body everywhere we touch.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" I ask. "Want me to call an ambulance?"

She touches the knot on her head. "No. I think I'm just a little bruised. I couldn't see the ice."

If she'd have been driving any faster, it could have been much worse. I check the bump, but the skin isn't broken. She'll hurt like hell tomorrow, but she should be fine. "My truck isn't far. Let me grab it, and I'll drop you wherever you need to go."

"I don't know where that is." Her eyebrows pinch, and she waves at the road. "My cabin was supposed to be here somewhere, but I can't find it."

Her cabin? She's one of Harmony's renters? If so, she's a day early. I squint at the cabin and my truck in the distance. Guess I should've asked Tucker for a lift. "We'll get you settled. Will you be okay for a few minutes?"

Her hands fist in my shirt, holding me close. "You're leaving?"

I hate the slight tremor in her voice. "See that cabin ahead? That's where I left my truck."

I'll be right back."

Her fingers clench tighter. "Okay."

She doesn't want me to go—because she's shaken from the accident or afraid to be alone. Either way, I can't leave her here.

I scoop her into my arms, tuck her against my chest, and head for the cabin.

Read the book here: <https://geni.us/AH-CowboyClaim>