

The Fallen Cowboy

by Mina Beckett

Chapter One

The dull, almost constant throb in Jess Coldiron's right thigh had become such a part of him, he could hardly remember what his life had been like before bad luck and love had tossed him into the air and tried stomping the life out of him.

But he'd had a life before the fall, a life of bucking broncs and trophy buckles, of cheering crowds and adrenaline rushes, and of flinging his hat high into the air when he made eight seconds.

Most days he didn't think about that life. But some days it crept in, and all he did was think.

He snatched his faded brown Stetson — a hat that was older than any of his relationships — from the dash of his truck and let out a weighted sigh as he scrubbed a thumb over the hoof print near the back of the brim.

He and the old hat had plenty in common. They'd both seen a lot of airtime, been knocked around, stomped on, and reshaped.

Nowadays, the hat kept the sun from his eyes, his hair in place, and reminded him of everything he had lost.

Jess's position as the executive director for the Promise Point Horse Rescue Ranch was nowhere near as demanding or rewarding as competing in the ProRodeo circuit, but it was a lot safer.

On a good day, sitting behind a desk didn't bother him, but on a bad one — when his thigh felt as though it were in a vice and under the merciless twist of a vengeful woman — it was

hell. A hell he hated because nothing, including the pain pills the doctors liked to throw at him, helped.

After his fall at the National Finals Rodeo eight years ago, he had undergone countless surgeries and months of grueling therapy just so he could walk again.

He'd learned to live with, and to an extent alleviate, the physical pain of his injury. He stayed in shape, worked out regularly, ate well, and was doing daily stretches. But this morning, he'd been in a hurry to get the workday over with.

He was paying for that now.

Jess put in long hours because he enjoyed his job, his locally hand-crafted desk, his well-worn leather office chair, and the embossed stationary set his sister, Louisa, had given him last year for Christmas.

Most of all, he liked his title. He liked seeing his name on the office door. Not because he needed to be some high falutin administrator. That wasn't Jess's style. He hated wearing a suit and tie and having to shave daily. His office attire was his scuffed-up Justin boots, a t-shirt, and faded jeans.

He liked his title because it kept him away from the shit and shovel part of the Rescue. The hands-on, horse, hoof, and halter part.

Holding to the pinch, he set the hat on his head, opened the door, and eased from his truck. He shifted his weight to his left foot and massaged his right thigh until he was sure he could walk before taking a step.

"You're doing it wrong."

"Oh, for God sakes, Logan," Violet moaned and threw up a hand in her brothers' direction. "Will you please shut up and let Ty fix the damn thing."

"Stay out of this, Vi," Logan warned.

On top of the pain in his thigh, Jess would probably have to play referee between two of his best friends and the woman responsible for his daily dose of caffeine.

Logan and Ty would forgive him for breaking up their family row. But Jess wasn't so sure Violet wouldn't punch him in the gut if he got in her way.

The baby of the Gates family could be a hard cup to measure. But Violet wasn't a pistol with a sensitive trigger like his sister Louisa. She was usually a sweet and somewhat callow woman who was often all smiles.

But lately, Violet had a rebellious side that often reared its ugly head when her brothers were too protective or dismissive. The woman could be as mean as a pissed-off grizzly when she was angry, and she was, all the way down to her petite pink sneakers dotted with brown and white drops of caffeinated beverages and high-calorie pastry frosting.

"Why?" she demanded, curling her fingers into fists. "Why do I have to stay out of this? I'm a part of this family, and a third of that rusty heap is mine."

"Hey!" Ty shouted from under the belly of the ranch truck. "Don't disrespect the Green Machine."

"Fine, you stubborn asses!" she threw up her hands. "Do whatever!"

"How many times has this damn thing died?" Ty asked, not waiting for an answer. "And how many times have I been the one to resurrect it?"

"Can't help it," Logan said. "Obviously, practice doesn't make perfect, little brother."

Holding back a groan, Jess slammed his truck door and slowly started down the incline towards the brothers.

Violet mumbled a heated curse as she stomped past him on her way to her baby 4x4 parked in front of his truck. "Those dunderheads have been messin' around with that damn thing

for almost three hours." She pointed to a stain on her pink Pixies Coffee Shop t-shirt. "I have grounds and caramel sauce all over me. I'm tired, hungry, and need a shower. They're all yours."

"Thanks a lot," he grumbled.

"Oh." She stopped in mid-stomp and swung around on a heel, the hard scowl on her face relaxing. "How's Eleanor? I haven't had a chance to call her. Have there been any changes?"

Five years ago, his niece Sophie had arrived without much warning and almost made her appearance on I-35, so his brother and sister-in-law, and every other member of the Coldiron family, were on high alert in anticipation of the couple's second child.

"No," he said, looking at his watch again. "I was on my way to Redemption to check on her when Logan called me for a tow."

His brother, McCrea, had handed over the long-distance rescues to Brody Vance, the horse trainer they'd hired last year, so he could be there when the baby was born. This afternoon McCrea was on his way back from a rescue on the other side of the county but would be home in time for supper.

His parents usually took turns checking in on the expectant mother. But his mom and Louisa were shopping in Houston, and his dad was out of town at a cattleman's meeting in Fort Worth.

If Eleanor went into labor, Jess was flying solo.

"Well, good luck at getting Ty to give up," she said with a blistering glare in their direction before she climbed in her truck. "Maybe you can bait him out with beer and beanie weenies."

Jess shuddered — remembering the atomic cloud that lingered in the air after Ty consumed the two — and

started towards the twenty-year-old heavy-duty diesel that should have been hauled to the junkyard years ago. “What’s the problem?”

“The problem is,” Logan said, raising from his bent position under the hood of the truck, “Ty doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground.”

Predictably, the brothers exchanged derogatory insults about holes and hoses before Jess intervened.

“What’s wrong with it this time?” He leaned over the grill to take a look at the motor.

“Hell, if I know,” Logan said, fidgeting with the fuel line. “It started choking and sputtering a few yards back. Then it just died.”

“Sounds like it’s out of fuel.” Jess threw in his two cents.

“It’s got half a tank,” Ty answered from below.

Logan closed his eyes as if he were asking the Almighty for patients. “Is the gauge working?”

Ty rolled out, stood, and dusted his backside. “It’s not the gauge.”

“Then what is it, genius?” Logan asked.

“I thought it had a fuel leak last week, so I crawled under to see if a line had busted.”

“And?” Logan prompted.

“It’s not a line,” Ty said, walking to the bed of the truck for his toolbox, a thought-filled pull pleating his brow. “I think it’s losing oil pressure from a clogged valve.”

And just like that, Ty had the problem figured out. Heading back to the front of the truck, he opened the beaten and battered hand-me-down box and started digging through it for sockets.

“You *think* it’s losing oil pressure?” Logan asked, sparring another argument.

A clogged valve was going to take longer than ten minutes, and Jess wasn't going to add to Ty's troubles by telling him to hurry.

Logan had that covered.

Ty was an excellent mechanic. Working in the oilfields and on the ranch had taught him how to improvise. And Jess had no doubt the truck would be up and running soon if Logan left him the hell alone.

"Just get in the damn truck and let me tow you back to the ranch," Jess said.

"I've almost got it," Ty said, unwilling to throw in the towel just yet.

"I'm leaving in ten minutes," Jess told them, catching sight of a long grease streak across the middle of his t-shirt. "With or without you."

"I only need five," Ty assured him.

"And a good mechanic," Logan threw in.

Jess snagged the hem of his t-shirt and yanked it over his head. He wasn't going to stand by in the July heat while the brothers verbally duked it out.

He let the tailgate of his truck bed down and hoisted himself onto it. Then he eased around and leaned his back against the inside of the bed, drew his good leg up, and stretched his bad leg out, feeling the tendons and scar tissue in his thigh tighten as he did.

He plucked his hat from his head and dropped it on his knee, then scrubbed a hand over his head, noting he should have made time for a haircut before his date with Brandi tonight.

The beautiful blonde executive of Winsor Rodeo Productions wouldn't mind the length of his hair, only his performance and stamina after dinner. With that in mind, Jess tried to drown out the sound of the bickering brothers.

But the distant hum of a vehicle brought his head up.

The gravel road, which was off the beaten path, ran through the heart of the Gates Ranch and rarely saw traffic, so whoever was behind the wheel of the dust cloud was either lost or looking for one of them.

More than likely, when the dust cleared, a face similar to Ty's would be staring back at them. But Jess would never let his friend know that he favored Clayton Durant, Ty's biological father, more than he did Emmett Gates, the man who had raised him.

"Yo, Ty." Logan swatted his brother's leg, thinking the same as Jess. "You've got company."

"What?" Ty called out without looking up.

Logan's voice went cold. "Clayton is here."

That got Ty's attention. "What the hell does he want?"

"He's probably a man short for some shit job," Logan said, staring flatly at the road, ready and waiting to face a man he despised, but tolerated for Ty's sake.

But as the vehicle sped closer, the outline of a motorcycle and its rider emerged from the dust.

Jess scooted from the tailgate. "Since when are bikes the vehicle of choice for Durant Drilling?"

"You couldn't tie Clayton to one," Logan answered, cleaning his hands on a grease rag from the floorboard of the truck.

Ty joined them as the bike slowed and then stopped about twenty feet from them. When the dust cleared, the curvy feminine form of the rider appeared.

The woman removed her helmet, freeing a crop of dark, mahogany hair and a face that looked nothing like the always-frowning roughneck, Clayton Durant: high cheekbones set against an oval face, a straight, elegant nose and lips that begged to be kissed.

A pair of stylish aviator sunglasses added to the mystery and stirred Jess's male curiosity.

The ends of her long locks were tousled and windblown from miles of road and sun. She gave her hair a shake and offered them a friendly smile. "Hi, guys."

The coarseness of her voice blew across Jess like a sultry breeze, arousing more than Jess's curiosity.

"Holy shit," Logan murmured.

"Fuck me," Ty whispered under his breath.

"She looks too smart for that," Logan returned without taking his eyes off the woman.

What she looked like was a hot, sexy fantasy plucked straight from the cover of a motorcycle magazine. The sight of her firm thighs straddling chrome and leather were enough to entice the most sainted man. And Jess had always been one step closer to hell than to heaven. Judging from the lustful expression on Logan's and Ty's faces he wouldn't be alone in the descent.

"Boys," Jess cleared his throat. "Remember your raisin'. Let's not act like primates."

"Says the man who has drool drippin' from his chin," Logan murmured.

Ty extended his hand to Jess. "I bet you fifty bucks I can get her number in under five minutes."

Usually, before Jess would have taken a bet like that, he would have upped the ante with, "I can get it in two." Because this woman — sitting astride a bike that alone gave him a hard-on, with slender legs clad in a pair of dark denim jeans and leather chaps, a trim waist and full breasts that pressed tight against her riding jacket — was exactly his type.

But something about *this* woman made Jess err on the side of caution and kept him from accepting that bet.

"She could be a reporter," Logan suggested.

She was relaxed and at home on the back of the fully blacked-out motorcycle. Reporters looking for a story about gold or rescued horses were usually more discreet, more plainly dressed, and never, ever sexy.

Jess swallowed, trying to dislodge the dry knot that had suddenly formed in his throat. "I haven't seen hide nor hair of a reporter in months, and I've never seen one on a murdered out Indian Chieftain Dark Horse."

"Yeah, you're right," Logan said, handing Ty the grease rag. "I don't think she's here for a story. But she could be part of the archeology team."

"No way," Ty disagreed. "She's too pretty to be diggin' in the dirt with those academic needle heads up at Vera la Luz."

Ty was probably right. Over the last two years, Jess had met several of the archeologists and grad students involved in the excavation of the old Spanish Mission atop Promise Point. Not one of them resembled this woman. Her complexion was too evenly colored and smooth for an outdoor occupation.

She tucked her helmet under an arm and glanced over her shoulder at the road as if she were waiting for someone to catch up with her.

Satisfied there wasn't, her eyes went back to them. She shifted her ass to the other side of the seat as her full lips pulled to one side in consideration. "Excuse me."

The cord tightened, stirring lust low in Jess's stomach. It pivoted downward when she lodged the tip of her leather-clad finger between her teeth and slid her hand free. It was an innocent but sensual gesture that made him hard.

"Maybe she's lost and looking for the interstate," Logan suggested.

“Reporter... archeologist.” Ty adjusted the waist of his dirty jeans and grinned. “I’m readily available for whatever Beautiful needs.”

She lifted her face towards the sun then closed her eyes, momentarily soaking up the rays. The smooth lines of her face were almost angelic. The woman was a tempting mixture of seductive innocence and alluring beauty. It was a combustible combination that caused caution to stir inside Jess's chest.

With a huff of frustration, her eyes opened, and again, she focused on the three of them. "Yo, fellas!" She impatiently slapped the side of her helmet to get their attention and pulled her sunglasses to the end of her nose, giving Jess a view of her dark eyes. "You guys speak English or something similar? I'm not fluent in grunts and scratches, but I'll figure it out."

Jess grinned and held up a hand to signal he was on his way. “A hundred bucks says I can send Beautiful packing in two minutes.”

Ty’s face contorted with confusion. “Why the hell would you do that?”

“Yeah, man,” Logan agreed, speaking from the side of his mouth. “She’s a knockout.”

Jess had experience lust at first sight more times than he cared to admit. The rodeo had been oozing with gorgeous women willing to share his bed as he climbed the ranks.

Some had been clingy and demanding. Some had acted innocent and accommodating. All of them had intentions of claiming a piece of him after they left his bed. Only one had come close. But that one had taught him trouble and heartache could come wrapped in a pretty package.

And as sure as there were Texas dirt and sun-fried grass beneath his boots, Beautiful was a biblical proportion of both. “Something’s not right about her. She’s trouble.”

“If she’s trouble, give me a double dose,” Ty said and started towards her.

“Hold up,” Jess said, halting him with a hand to the mid-section. “I’ll handle this.”

“Oh, he’ll handle it,” Logan mocked.

“Yeah.” Ty laughed. “I know what he wants to handle.”

Ignoring the brothers, Jess made his way up the incline to the road. His steps were slow, his gait jerky and stiff. It was hard for a man to feel confident when he could hardly walk, but Jess held his grin.

“Can I help you?” he asked, noticing that her eyes weren’t brown but hazel.

“Ah...yeah,” she said, glancing at his leg. “I hope so.”

Jess was used to drawing pity stares and brief looks of interest. His way of dealing with it was by ignoring it. But Beautiful’s empathetic glance was a double punch to his manhood.

“I’m trying to find Redemption. Charlie and Rose Mackenna’s ranch.”

The Mackenna Ranch was next to his parents’ ranch. McCrea and Eleanor had begun remodeling the old house soon after they were married last year. But all that had been put on hold until after the baby was born.

The last few weeks had been stressful for the newlyweds, and Jess wasn’t about to add to their problems by giving Beautiful directions to Redemption until he knew what she wanted.

He gave her a flirty wink. “Now what would a pretty thing like you want with that dilapidated old horse ranch?”

“I — ah.” Her eyes squinted and her lips did a cute little twist of annoyance. “It’s urgent that I speak with Eleanor Mackenna. Do you know her?”

Jess pretended to think. “The name seems familiar.”

She motioned towards the bike's instrument panel. "I followed the GPS —"

"Those things aren't reliable out here," Logan interjected, walking up to where Jess was standing.

"A lot of these back roads are nothing but horse trails," Ty added, stuffing the end of the grease rag into his back pocket as he joined them.

She took a deep breath and let it out. "Great."

"Don't worry." Jess widened his grin. "I'll give you directions."

Relief relaxed her shoulders. "You will?"

"Sure," he said, walking closer. "What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't help a lady in need?"

They weren't the first cowboys Mallory Montgomery had seen up close and personal.

La Claire, New Mexico, had been full of smooth-talking, wannabe rodeo champions who thought they were God's gift to women.

But these guys were different from those low-life hustlers. There was an authenticity to them that sank in deeper than their scuffed-up cowboy boots, dusty cattleman hats, and worn Wranglers.

The one walking towards her with a lazy but somewhat halting saunter looked like he would be entirely at home in the saddle.

His jeans were frayed and threadbare in places, but the man had a finesse about him. She tore her eyes from his tanned and sweaty six-pack long enough to notice a tiny scar near the bottom of his stubble-covered chin. "You're familiar with the ranch?"

His lips inched from playful to roguish, giving her a glimpse of his straight, white teeth. That sinfully dirty grin of his was oddly familiar. Maybe she had seen him at one of the rodeos or one of the art festivals in Monterey Bay. Or perhaps she had met him at work. There had been more than one cowboy amble through the doors of the Pallento Fine Arts Gallery.

“Vaguely,” he said, stopping a few feet short of her bike.

His eyes were frosty blue, a color that bit into her with the exhilaration of a cold winter’s day. A glint of mischief danced across them when the taller cowboy behind him cleared his throat to stifle a laugh.

Despite the heat, Mallory shivered, overcome by a strange sensation pulling at her core.

She had a feeling that underneath his Texas drawl and charming front, there was something downright wicked hiding beneath the surface of this cowboy’s cool blue eyes.

Something fun and playful, but not harmful. Having grown up in a place like La Claire had given her a sixth sense about men and her surroundings.

Judging from the handshake Cool Blue and the other cowboy had exchanged before he walked over, she was sure that some sort of wager had been made regarding her.

Typical.

As irritating as their dude bullshit bet was, Mallory knew she had little choice but to indulge in their juvenile ways if she wanted to find the Mackenna ranch.

Cool Blue pointed down the road in the opposite direction she had traveled. “Keep going on this road and at the end, turn left. Follow that road for about eight miles until it forks. Then turn right onto the gravel road and follow it to a green gate.”

“Left. Then straight until it forks. Then right on the gravel road. Green gate,” Mallory repeated, memorizing the directions. “Got it. Thanks.”

She shoved her hands into her gloves and started the bike as he moved a step closer.

“Happy to help,” he said, reaching out to loop a strand of her hair around his forefinger.

Mallory recoiled and knocked his hand away. “Whoa, there, Cool Blue.”

She could handle herself. Aiden had taught her self-defense when she moved to California, and if all else failed, she had mace in her jacket pocket.

“Look but don’t touch,” she said, throwing back her head to helmet up.

His eyes narrowed a fraction with humor before he took a step back and surrendered both hands. “I didn’t mean any harm. But I was hoping for more than a ‘thank you’ as payment for those directions.