



## The Cowboy and the Lady (Forever, Texas)

By Marie Ferrarella

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...and this tiny Texas town is Deborah Kincannon's last hope. The Indiana nurse will do whatever it takes to save her troubled teenage brother from their painful past. Debi isn't prepared for the community that welcomes them with open arms—or Jackson White Eagle, the handsome rancher who's giving new meaning to starting over.

As co-owner of the Healing Ranch, Forever's former bad boy is paying it forward. But Debi's brother isn't the only one who's blossoming under Jackson's innovative program for giving back to his town. The pretty, guarded newcomer is igniting a powerful yearning that's bringing out the unlikely hero in him. Can Jackson convince Debi that she has finally found her safe haven—with him?

An Entertainment Weekly Top 10 Romance Author

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

This USA TODAY bestselling and RITA ® Award-winning author has written more than two hundred books for Harlequin Books and Silhouette Books, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at [www.marieferrarella.com](http://www.marieferrarella.com).

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Standing just inside the corral, Jackson White Eagle leaned back against the recently repainted railing, watching three of the current crop of teenage boys, who lived in the old converted bunkhouse, put the horses through their paces.

They probably didn't realize that in actuality the horses were putting *them* through *their* paces, Jackson thought. Training horses trained *them*.

He felt the corners of his mouth curve just a little in satisfaction.

Whatever the reason behind it, even after all this time, it still felt odd to glance in a mirror or a reflecting window and realize that he was smiling. The first ten or so years of his life, there had been precious little for him to smile about. He had grown up with nothing but bitter words and anger erupting, time and again, in his house.

His parents were always fighting. His father, Ben White Eagle, was a great deal larger than his mother and Jackson had instinctively taken his mother's side. He'd appointed himself her protector even though at ten, he had been small for his age and his father had continually referred to him as "a worthless runt."

Despite that demoralizing image, he had tried his best to protect the woman who had given him life. He went on being protective of his mother until the day that she walked out on his father—and him.

At first, he had convinced himself that it was just an oversight on her part. He'd told himself that his mother was too angry at his father to realize that she'd left without him.

Night after night, he waited, listening for her return.

But after two weeks had passed, and then three, and then four, he knew he had to face the truth. His mother wasn't coming back for him. That forced him to face the fact that the person who he had loved most in the world hadn't loved him enough to take him with her. His heart broke.

And then he just shut down.

By then, four weeks after his mother had taken off, his father was already preparing to get married again. He was marrying the woman he'd been having an affair with. The affair that had produced another son and had been the final straw for his first wife.

Like him, his stepmother, Sylvia, was only half Navajo. Sylvia was also the mother of his half brother, Garrett, who was five at the time of his parents' marriage.

The second his father brought Sylvia into the house, Jackson was certain that he was going to be locked out of the family. In his eyes, his father, Sylvia and Garrett formed a complete unit. That left him in the role of the outsider, unwanted and on the outside, looking in.

But Sylvia hadn't been the typical stepmother he'd expected. To his surprise, she reached out to him. She went so far as to tell him that she wasn't going to try to take his mother's place. But that didn't mean that he couldn't come to her with anything that was bothering him. Knowing that he'd gone through a lot, she said that she intended to be there for him, as well as for Garrett. To her, they were *both* her sons.

He'd appreciated the effort on Sylvia's part, but he was just too angry at the world, predominantly his mother, to allow Sylvia into his life. He began acting out, taking part in unacceptable behavior.

Things went from bad to worse.

His father's idea of fixing a problem was to take a belt to the cause. At first, he did it covertly, waiting until he got Jackson alone. But he soon tired of that and lashed out at him the moment his temper flared.

The first time Sylvia became aware of what her husband was doing, she quickly put herself between him and Jackson. Ben had shoved her aside, which caused Jackson to attempt to tackle him. It ended badly for Jackson, but he had gotten a few licks in before his father had gotten the better of him.

Sylvia had called the reservation police. Ben White Eagle took off for parts unknown that same night, before they came for him.

Jackson was relieved that his father was gone, but the absence of his father's salary made life very difficult for Sylvia, his half brother and him. Sylvia never blamed him, never threw the incident in his face. This didn't change the fact that he felt as if he was to blame for everything that had gone wrong.

Things got even worse.

He got arrested—more than once. And each time he did, Sylvia would go to the local law enforcement establishment on the reservation, pay whatever fines needed to be paid and bring him back home.

Jackson secretly felt sorry for what he was putting her through, but even her tears hadn't gotten him to change. Angry at the world and with little to no self-esteem to speak of, for a while it looked as if his fate was predestined—and cast in stone.

And then his stepmother, in what she later admitted to him was one final act of desperation, turned to his father's older and far sterner, as well as far more stable, brother, Sam, for help. Sam White Eagle had pulled himself out of poverty and had, Jackson later found out, managed to survive personal tragedy, as well, although at the time it had been touch and go. His wife of less than eighteen months died giving birth to his son. Beset by a number of complications, the baby had died a couple of days later. Sam had them buried together. And then he had shut himself down emotionally, losing himself in bottle after bottle until he finally pulled himself up out of what he recognized would have been a death spiral.

Emotionally stoic, he did feel for his brother's sons as well as for Sylvia, which led to his taking her up on her plea.

Sam became the male role model for both him and for Garrett. Initially, his uncle put them both to work on

his small horse ranch. His reasoning was that if they were kept constantly busy, they wouldn't have the time, not to mention the energy, to act out.

His uncle turned out to be right. Jackson knew that to the end of his days, no matter what he accomplished, he would owe it all to Sam. When his uncle died, leaving the ranch to him and to Garrett, Jackson decided that Sam's work should continue. He broached the idea to Garrett, who didn't need to be sold on it. His brother wholeheartedly agreed with him before he'd had a chance to finish a second sentence.

And that was how The Healing Ranch came to be. Five years after Sam had passed away, the ranch was still in existence, turning out top-quality quarter horses and transformed juvenile offenders who had learned to walk the straight and narrow.

Secretly, Jackson had thought that, after a while, this so-called crusade he had undertaken would get old for him. When he had first started all this, he hadn't realized that there was a part of him that actually enjoyed the challenge, that looked forward to that rush that came when he knew that the misdirected kid he was working with had turned a corner and no longer was interested in gaining notoriety for what he did wrong but for what he did that was right.

"Wish you were here, Sam, to see this," Jackson murmured under his breath. He glanced up at the all but cloudless sky. "This is all your doing, you know," he added.

"You know, they lock people up who talk to themselves with such feeling," Garrett said to his older brother as he came over to join him.

Five years younger than Jackson, and with only their father in common, the whole world could still easily identify the two as brothers. They almost looked alike, from their deep, thick, blue-black hair to their hypnotic blue eyes. Jackson's had come directly from his mother while with Garrett it was most likely someone somewhere within his family tree.

"Just your word against mine, Garrett. No one else is anywhere within earshot so there's no one around to back up your claim. They'll think you just want the ranch all to yourself and that you're looking for a way to get me out of the picture," Jackson told him.

So saying, Jackson eyed his half brother. They had gone through a lot together, he thought with affection. That didn't mean that either of them ever purposely missed a chance to zing the other.

Garrett grinned. "I guess you saw right through my plot." He snapped his fingers like someone acknowledging a missed opportunity. "Foiled again. Looks like I'm just going to have to come up with another way to take over the old homestead."

Jackson glanced at his watch. The latest applicant he had accepted at the beginning of the week should have arrived by now. He wondered if something had happened to bring about a change in plans. It wouldn't be the first time a teen's parent or guardian had backed out of the arrangement before it ever started. Total commitment was required and sometimes that didn't pan out.

"I take it there's no word yet on our latest resident 'bad boy'?" he asked Garrett.

Heaven help him, he needed a new challenge, Jackson thought. Needed to be given another teen to turn around and thereby rescue. With each and every one that he and Garrett rehabilitated, he was paying off a

little more of the debt that he owed to Sam, a debt that he could never really fully repay. And although his uncle had been gone for a few years now, Jackson felt that somehow, Sam knew the good that was being done in his name by the boy he had saved from coming to a very an unsavory end.

Garrett climbed onto the corral, straddling the top rail.

"Not yet," he answered. "I just checked phone messages, emails and text messages. Unless the kid and his guardian are using smoke signals to communicate, they haven't tried to get in touch with us." Garrett shrugged casually. "Could be they just decided to change their minds at the last minute."

"Always possible," Jackson admitted—although he really doubted it. The call he had received from the troubled teen's guardian made him feel that the woman thought that the situation was desperate—just as desperate as she was. He'd heard things in her voice that she hadn't knowingly put into words, but he'd heard them just the same. Things that told him that even if he didn't have a ready bed for this latest applicant, he would have found a way to make room somehow.

Luckily, he hadn't had to get creative on that front. When he'd inherited the ranch, he and Garrett had renovated the bunkhouse so that it could handle eight boys with ease. Ten would have necessitated bringing in two extra twin beds and space would have been rather limited, but it could be done.

Currently, there were seven boys living on the ranch besides Garrett and himself. His latest success story, Casey Brooks, had graduated less than a week ago. Upon his initial arrival, Casey had been one seriously messed-up, lost sixteen-year-old. His parents had gotten in contact with him because they were genuinely afraid that their son would either be killed or eventually land in prison, where heaven only knew what would happen to him.

Casey had been so tightly wound up it was a wonder he hadn't just exploded before he ever came to The Healing Ranch.

Getting through to the inner, hidden, decent teen had required an extreme amount of patience and going not just the extra mile but the extra twenty miles. There were times when he was certain that Casey was just too far gone to reach. Those were the times that he had made himself channel Sam, recalling how his uncle had managed to get to him back when he was just like Casey.

It worked, and in the end it had all paid off. That was all he—and Garrett—were ever interested in. The final results. That made everything that had come before—the strategizing, the enduring of endless hostility and curses—all worth it. And he also kept in contact with former "graduates," taking an interest in their lives and making sure that they remained proud of their own progress—and didn't backslide.

So far, he hadn't lost a single teen. He intended to keep it that way.

"Hey, you think that's them?" Garrett asked. Shading his eyes with one hand, he pointed at something behind his brother's back with the other.

Jackson turned around to see a beige, almost nondescript sedan that had definitely seen better days approaching from the north. The road was open, but the driver refrained from speeding, something that tempted a lot of drivers around the area, whether they were tourists or natives.

The closer the vehicle came, the dustier it appeared. Jackson recalled that his new challenge hailed from the

state of Indiana. Indianapolis to be precise. And unless the Dallas airport car rental agency was dealing in really beaten-up-looking vehicles these days, his latest boarder had been driven down to Forever rather than coming in by airplane.

*Interesting*, Jackson thought.

Restless, impatient and worried, Ryan Winter shifted in his seat for the umpteenth time even though he had decided more than several hundred miles ago that there was no such thing as a comfortable position in his sister's beat-up, secondhand sedan.

Ryan glared out the window, sulking.

He'd always been able to get his sister to come around to his way of thinking. But the other morning, when she had told him—not asked, but *told*, something he was still angry about—that they were going to a place called Forever, Texas, he'd thought she was kidding. It wasn't until she'd marched into his room and thrown some of his clothes into a suitcase, then grabbed him by the arm and all but thrown *him* into the car after the suitcase, that he realized she was serious.

Dead serious.

He'd tried to reason with her, then he threatened, cajoled and pleaded, going through the entire gamut of ordinarily successful avenues of getting her to change her mind. But every attempt had failed. One by one, his sister had tossed them all by the wayside. She wasn't going to let him talk or con his way out of going to this stupid, smelly horse place, and he was furious.

He'd had all those miles to sufficiently work himself up.

He thought he knew why this was happening. Because he was the reason why her stick-in-the-mud husband had left. But just because her life was falling apart was no reason for her to take it out on him.

Making one last-ditch attempt to get her to turn the car around, Ryan said, "Look, I'm sorry about your marriage breaking up, but the way I see it, I did you a favor. John was a loser, and you're a hell of a lot better off without him. If you're dumping me here at this stupid prison ranch just to get even, it's not going to work because I swear I'm taking off the first chance I get," he added for good measure, thinking that would really get to his sister. Debi was very big on family and he was officially all she had. He felt confident that the threat of losing him would be enough to get his sister to back off about this prison ranch and give him the space he needed. "And if I do leave, you'll never find me."

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