



You're late." Travis Cavanagh planted his cowboy boots in the dust beside the corral and parked his fists on his hips. "Twenty minutes."

"Because this is somehow the end of the world as we know it?" Dakota Erickson swung out of her compact car. "Because you've never once been late bringing Toby back to town on a Sunday afternoon?"

Travis reached for the backdoor handle as much to block the sight of Dakota's long legs as to release his son from the confines of his car seat. "Hi, cowpoke."

"Daddy!" Toby bounced out of the car and launched himself at Travis.

His kid made putting up with Dakota worth it. Dakota, who still had the power to slice Travis down to size with a

single sneer. Yeah, he asked for it. Could he plead self-defense? Because he couldn't let her see how she still affected him. She didn't need the ammunition. Travis hoisted Toby to the corral rail beside him before daring to glance at Dakota again.

She was gorgeous. Always had been, even as a teen, but managing a western wear shop had finally enabled her to dress the part. She'd grown into her beauty. He'd rather not look, but it was hard to resist.

That was behind him. The only thing linking them together now was Toby, who was a bittersweet reminder of all that had been and all that could have been if Travis hadn't been such a hothead. It didn't matter that he'd give anything to replay those days and come up with a different outcome.

Dakota was done with him, which meant he was done with her.

Except for their four-year-old.

“Are you finished ogling me?”

He blinked Dakota into focus. If nothing else snapped him back to reality, it was the cool disdain on her face as she gathered her long dark hair in one hand and tossed it over her shoulder.

She's just trying to rattle you, dude.

But Travis could match the chill. He raised his eyebrows, gave her a slow once-over from her pretty face, down her snap-front shirt with its fringed yoke, slim-fitting jeans, and red cowboy boots, then back up. “Done now. Got a problem with that?”

“Here’s the rest of the view.” She spun on one heel, keeping her gaze fixed on his.

“Very nice. You might want to take the tags off that shirt, though.”

She started to reach for her collar then glared at him. “I already did.”

“Made you check.” And now he felt like he had the upper hand. Juvenile. He knew it, but that had never kept him from seeking high ground. High *moral* ground, however, he’d ditched a long time ago, as evidenced by the child they shared.

Toby. Travis reached for his little sidekick on the log rail, but his hand came up empty. He pivoted, panic beginning to claw at his throat, only to hear his son’s high toddler voice. “I feeds Clover.”

Travis’s thirteen-year-old half-sister answered. “Sure. Here’s an apple slice for your pony.”

“One of these times you’re going to lose him completely if you don’t pay closer attention.” Dakota’s glare turned full North Pole cold. “Maybe we should revisit our schedule.”

“He’s fine with Emma.” And this, right here, was why Travis did his best to be out fencing or riding or cutting hay or anything at all on a Friday afternoon. Not because he didn’t want to spend every single second he could with his son, but because Dakota made him second-guess absolutely every decision he made, starting with which boot to put on first in the morning.

Dakota glanced toward the open stable door. “I’ll just give him a kiss and be on my way.”

“Do you have to drag it out? He’s fine. You can hear it for yourself.”

Right on cue, Toby giggled, and Emma laughed with him.

“Just because you’re a cold, uncaring parent doesn’t mean I have to be.”

What on earth? “What makes you think I don’t care? He’s my kid. Of course, I care.”

“Right.” She skirted around him and entered the stable. “Hi, Emma. Good thing you were here. Bye, buddy. See you Sunday. Be a good boy for Emma and Daddy.”

“It’s always good.” The sound of his smacking kiss nearly wiped the scowl from Travis’s face.

Might have succeeded if Dakota hadn’t managed additional digs at his parenting in that brief exchange, as though his little sister was more responsible than he was.

“Bye, Trav. Try not to be late dropping him off on Sunday, okay? I have plans for the evening, and I’d rather not wait around.” She slid into her car.

His blood pressure spiked again. “I’ll be just as considerate of you as you are of me.”

Dakota’s window rolled down a couple of inches. “How about being a grownup here? Some of us don’t live with Daddy anymore or take our orders from him every morning. Some of us had to embrace becoming an adult for, you know, assorted reasons.” She arched her brows with a pointed look toward the stable. “See you Sunday.”

She cranked her engine, whipped the little clunker into reverse, and peeled around until she faced the long ranch

driveway. Then she scattered gravel and dust as she sped away.

Which was the perfect time for his father to storm out of the tack room, scowling. Travis groaned as Declan turned toward him.

“Would you remind her how far dust flies on this ranch? A little respect goes a long way.”

“It’s not like she listens to anything I say.” Even to himself, Travis’s voice sounded petulant. If his dad had overheard the entire exchange, Travis was hooped anyway.

“Wear the pants in your family.”

Oh, because Dad was such a great example of that? Declan had driven Travis’s mother to file for divorce and shunted his current wife into a suite of rooms in the big ranch house’s walk-out basement. Not that Kathryn wasn’t allowed off the ranch, of course, but it was clear to their six his-and-hers sons and their two shared daughters that Declan and Kathryn had anything but a cooperative marriage. Dad was a fine one to be spouting relationship advice.

Reminding him of that had never gone over well.

Travis strode into the stable to find his son. He needed to block out all that negative stuff and spoil the kid as much as he could in forty-eight hours.

Declan might not be a doting grandfather, but at least he allowed Travis to have Toby at the ranch every weekend without a hassle.

Travis scooped Toby away from Emma. “Thanks for watching him a minute. Hey, cowpoke, ready for a ride with Daddy?”

“On Clover? Yes!”

Getting Toby his own pony for his fourth birthday had been a brilliant idea. “Let’s go then.”



Dakota was still fuming when she pulled in her drive and spotted her neighbor out watering the flower bed beside her front door.

“Hey, Dakota!”

“Hi, Sage.” Since Sage’s roommate had married and moved out a month ago, the woman had been a lot needier than before. Today, though, Dakota wasn’t into it. Movie night with a bunch of romantic chick-flicks held no appeal.

“Toby’s off to the ranch?”

Just like every weekend, but Sage knew that. Dakota nodded.

“Want to do something?”

“Sorry, not tonight. I... need to get some orders placed at the store.”

“Aw, you never take time off.”

Which was pretty much true. And Sage needed something to occupy herself with. “You should sign up for the Pot of Gold Treasure Hunt this summer. Creekside Fellowship is hosting that again, right?”

“I wish you’d come to church with me.”

Not a chance. Attending Creekside would mean watching Travis and his family interact with Toby, and Dakota couldn’t handle it. “I’m happy at Grace.”

“But there are hardly any young singles there.”

Dakota shrugged. “I don’t mind. I’m not looking for anyone.” Except for Travis to change into a decent man, which wouldn’t happen for a few more decades, if ever. “Seriously, though, why not join the geocaching hunt? It sounds like fun and a great way to make new friends.”

“I’ll do it if you do.”

“Sorry. You’ve got way more free time than I do. I don’t think Toby would appreciate being dragged up and down hiking trails every night.” And she definitely wasn’t giving Travis an opening for more time with their son.

On the flip side, it was always entertaining when he assumed she was dating someone else. She did it once in a while just to check if Travis still had a beating heart. Turns out he did jealous really well. So well she usually let the rumors float while she stayed in the duplex and ate popcorn. If he could dig at her, she could dig back.

“There’s a gymkhana this weekend out at the fairgrounds. Travis ever put him in something like that?”

Now that shot Dakota straight back to her teens. She feigned nonchalance. “He’s never mentioned the idea to me. Besides, Toby’s just turned four.” Dakota twirled her car keys and glanced toward her front door. “He’s really too young.”

Travis wouldn’t want to start their son down the path to rodeo, would he? Sure, he and Dakota had thrived in that environment when they were kids. Informal races, whittling their riding and roping skills, with some of them hoping for the big time. Like Travis’s stepbrother, Adam, who’d done well for himself in pro rodeo after getting started in local events.

No way did Dakota want that life for her baby. Adam had made good money, but by risking his neck every time he rode? Her mama heart couldn’t handle the thought.

Better he turned out like Adam than like Dakota’s own brother, though.

Sage looped the hose around its bib. “You and Travis ever going to patch things up?”

“Who said I wanted to?”

“You’re always a little grumpy when you get back on Friday afternoons. I thought it might have something to do with unrequited love.”

Dakota managed a laugh. “Oh, you’re such a dreamer. Fix things with Caleb Grant if you want a project.” Travis may have been homeschooled out at Rockstead Ranch, but Dakota had attended the public high school just a couple of years behind Sage and Caleb. She remembered the item they’d been then and how they avoided each other like the plague now,

although they did attend the same church. Sage was a braver soul than Dakota.

“Nothing to fix.” Sage waved an airy hand. “We’ve been over each other forever.”

“Uh huh. Tell yourself what you need to hear.” Dakota edged toward her front door. “Talk to you later.” Then she completed her getaway, sighing with relief as she leaned against the closed door from inside.

She should probably look for a new rental if she didn’t want to see her neighbor, but Sage was nearly the only friend she had. And wasn’t that sort of upheaval bad for kids? Toby shifted between his parents every weekend as it was. He had his own western-style bedroom and a few sets of clothes in his dad’s cabin, and a Toy-Story-themed bedroom at home. Not much went back and forth with him. Except for...

Dakota’s gaze landed down the hallway where a plush Woody lay abandoned in the doorway to her son’s room. Hadn’t she stuffed that in Toby’s pack? She was sure she had, but had she zipped it?

She groaned. This was not going to be pretty. On the other hand, Travis could handle it. Right? Except he wouldn’t discover the missing toy until he was tucking a sleepy little boy in bed, and then — boom — the screaming fits would start. Then he’d phone her and beg her to drive back up to Rockstead, and she’d be frustrated, and... she already was.

If it were just Travis, she’d let him deal with it. But it was her young son who’d take hours to sob himself to sleep, and she couldn’t live with herself, knowing how traumatized he’d

be. If a mama could fix things before they happened and keep the peace, she needed to do that.

Dakota tugged her phone out of her hip pocket and tapped Travis's number. It rang the requisite three times and went to voicemail. Figured. Rockstead Ranch didn't have cell coverage except near the main house and stables, which meant Travis was terrible about keeping his phone on him. And even worse about picking up when it was her, especially on the weekend.

She could leave him a message and then hang around and wait for his reply, or she could do the adult thing and drive the stuffed doll up to Rockstead right now. Then it would be off her mind, and no one would be traumatized, except possibly Travis when she showed up a second time today.

That's what a good mom would do, and she was a good mom.

And she'd reward herself for going the extra mile — sixty extra miles, actually, if she counted both directions — by getting takeout from the Golden Grill on her way back into town.

She grabbed the plush toy and glanced around Toby's room to make sure there was nothing else he needed but, of course, there wasn't.

He had everything else he needed at his dad's... except his mama.

Give Me Another Chance, Cowboy ©2021 Valerie Comer

Give Me Another Chance, Cowboy

Cavanagh Cowboys Romance 2

released in February, 2021