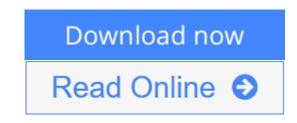
# A Cowboy's Pride PAMERA BRITTON

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Alana knows Trent's injuries aren't as extensive as he thinks, and with some hard work she's convinced he will ride again. But the problem is convincing Trent. As Alana works with the wounded cowboy, she is drawn to him in a way that is anything but professional. She's determined to help him, though—even if it means he'll walk away from her.

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#### A Cowboy's Pride By Pamela Britton Bibliography

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#### **Editorial Review**

#### About the Author

With over a million books in print, Pamela Britton likes to call herself the best known author nobody's ever heard of. Of course, that's begun to change thanks to a certain licensing agreement with that little racing organization known as NASCAR. But before the glitz and glamour of NASCAR, Pamela wrote books that were frequently voted the best of the best by The Detroit Free Press, Barnes & Noble (two years in a row) and RT BOOKclub Magazine.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. "He's here."

Alana McClintock kept her gaze firmly on the frying pan in front of her, though she glanced up quickly at the teenager who burst into the spacious state-of-the-art kitchen like a colt from a pasture. The black cowboy hat the girl wore just about fell from her head.

"It's got to be him, Alana," the fourteen-year-old all but should, brown ponytail flying. "They said they'd be here around five and it's a little after that right now."

The butter-and-brown-sugar mixture began to lose its viscosity, a sure sign the homemade syrup was about to boil. "Be there in a sec."

"But you're going to miss it," the girl wailed.

There. Tiny bubbles began to form on the bottom. Alana grabbed her whisk. Timing was everything here. If she let it get too hot, it would crystallize. If she didn't get things hot enough, it would turn into a gooey mess, and Cabe and Rana wouldn't have anything to pour over their flapjacks. She'd never hear the end of it, either.

"Here comes the bus right now."

She stirred the mixture with more and more speed, then quickly counted down. Five. Four. Three. Two...

"Done." She grabbed a pot holder and clutched the cast-iron skillet, taking it off the stove. "Who needs a double boiler?"

"Hurry!"

"All right, all right."

With the pan safely off to the side and the gas off, Alana turned toward Rana. The teenager had the appearance of a kid on Christmas morning. No surprise since her hero, a man Rana had looked up to since she was old enough to watch TV and, more important, the National Finals Rodeo, was about to arrive at New Horizons Ranch.

Albeit in a wheelchair.

"Hurry," Rana cried, spinning on her heel and running from the kitchen, her cowboy boots leaving clumps of

dirt on the floor.

"Rana," Alana scolded. "You know how much that drives me nuts. No boots in the house." The teenager had disappeared.

Alana followed at a more leisurely pace. Never before had Rana shown so much enthusiasm for a guest, and there'd been a lot of guests come and go over the years. They were primarily a dude ranch, one of the best in the nation, according to a review they'd recently received, yet they did more than escort people on trail rides. They specialized in guests with disabilities. Guests who couldn't walk, guests missing limbs, guests with severe deformities. Alana provided therapy if they needed it. Sometimes it was the parents who were disabled, sometimes the children. New Horizons made sure *everyone* enjoyed the same types of activities: horseback riding, swimming and, most of all, the Feather River.

But this was the first time they'd have a single guest, and he was their first official celebrity, if people in the rodeo world could be called celebrities. Rana lived and breathed rodeo. This was her first year riding for her high school team. Her best event, breakaway roping, was similar to the kind of roping seen on TV. So when she'd heard Trent Anderson would be a guest, well, there'd been no living with the child. The world-famous All-Around Cowboy was one of Rana's all-time heroes, right behind her father, who also happened to be Alana's boss...sort of.

"Finally decided to join us," teased that boss when she stepped onto the porch a moment later. Cabe smiled, a grin so much like his brother's, Alana had to look away. Braden would have been glad to welcome Trent Anderson, too.

"You know Alana wouldn't miss this for the world." Rana clutched her dad's left hand, her gaze firmly on the bus visible through the pine trees in the front pasture. The two of them were like carbon copies of each other with their brown hair, blue eyes and small noses. They each wore blue-checkered shirts, though in different shades. Rana's was more brilliant than Cabe's, a shade of blue that matched their eyes. They both wore the same type of cowboy hat—flat—not like a John Wayne hat with a curled brim. More like Wyatt Earp's. Vaquero-style, it was called, the flat hats popular in the high desert. Rana had complemented her outfit with a butterf ly-blue "wild rag," a silk bandanna that cowboys used to shield their faces from the cold. Rana had wrapped it around her neck, the ends dangling down in front of her.

"I just hope this wasn't a mistake," she heard Cabe say as she walked up next to him.

"Why would this be a mistake?" Rana tipped her head to the side to stare up at her dad.

"Usually, we've never met our guests prior to their visit."

There was something in Cabe's eyes that put Alana on alert. He was frowning as the bus approached.

"It'll be fine." Alana gently nudged his arm.

"I hope so." He gave her a smile in return.

Alana took a deep breath, filling her lungs with air that seemed scented with oregano, but was actually wild sage. They were a million miles from nowhere, in God's country, in northern California where pine trees turned the meadows army-green and snow turned the tip of an ancient volcano a glorious white. They were in a valley, one surrounded by low-lying mountains, the volcano to her northwest, though it was so far away

it was difficult to gauge just how big it really was over the tops of the whispering pine trees. Just glancing at the snow made Alana pull her black thigh-length sweater tight around her. It was late afternoon, the sun hiding behind the Douglas firs so that their trunks threw long shadows onto the ground. When the light disappeared, it'd be cold.

"Why is Tom driving sooooo slow?" grumbled Rana.

She followed Rana's gaze. A yellow bus, the kind traditionally associated with schools, had turned down their driveway, the tires kicking up dust. It was almost summer, but the valley was known for its late springs, and yellow wildflowers dotted the pasture, the blooms having cropped up so quickly it was as if they celebrated the change in temperatures. Though it was California, it wasn't uncommon for frost to wreak havoc. So the wildflowers weren't the only living things to be glad the bitterly cold weather was over—Alana was grateful, too.

"Do you think he'll remember you, Dad?" Rana stood in front of her father now, her dad's arms resting upon her shoulders. She looked up and back and shot him a wide smile. He was the center of her universe. The filling in her Hostess cupcake. The espresso in her caramel macchiato. It'd been that way ever since Rana's mother died, and once again Alana had to look away as she thought back to those difficult days. So much tragedy. So much loss. And now, look. Rana had learned to walk again, and the ranch had a new name...and a new mission, and she...well, Alana had taken on the role of surrogate mother even though there was nothing romantic between her and Cabe.

#### "Oh, he remembers me."

Something about the way Cabe said those words had Alana glancing at him sharply. Had there been bad blood between them when Cabe had quit the rodeo circuit to nurse his little girl? Alana couldn't remember hearing anything. Of course, Cabe and Braden had competed at a different level than Trent. The brothers had just begun to take their rodeo careers seriously—flying to bigger, out-of-state rodeos, an eye on the National Finals Rodeo.

And then the car accident.

Both she and Cabe had lost loved ones. He a brother and a wife, she a future husband, and the two of them had clung to each other in their grief. There'd never been anything between them, never would be, but she'd stuck around for Rana's sake. She'd talked about moving out. Cabe and Rana wouldn't hear of it. They still needed each other, Rana said. She couldn't be without her aunt Alana. She was family, they had both insisted, the tragedy having bonded them together in a way none of them could have imagined. In fact, the similarities between what had happened to them and what had happened to their new guest, Trent, gave Alana chills.

#### Could they fix him like they'd fixed Rana?

Something hissed. Alana jerked back only to realize the bus had pulled to a stop in front of the old farmhouse that had been in Trent's family for decades—a massive three-story straight-up-and-down affair with old-fashioned sash windows and a jagged roofline meant to ward off snow. They'd built her a small single-story apartment opposite the massive lawn that stretched across the backyard. It was cozy, but comfy, and exclusively hers.

"Here we go," Cabe said as the door folded open.

She leaned forward. He was the only guest arriving today. With the whir and whine of an electric motor, a ramp unfolded, and Alana caught her first glimpse of the rodeo hero inside, although she couldn't see much. He sat slumped in his wheelchair, face in profile, the only thing that stood out clearly his off-white cowboy hat.

"Welcome to the New Horizons Ranch," Rana pronounced, tipping up on her toes in excitement.

No response.

By now, Alana's eyes had adjusted. What she saw was a chiseled profile instantly recognizable as the one from TV. A chin so square it would do Dudley Do-Right proud, although not in a bad way. He was handsome. She had once heard someone refer to him as "hot," thanks to his tanned skin, silver-buckle-colored eyes and dark blond hair. He had wide shoulders—not that you could see that now, not with him slumped over as he was. It looked as though he hadn't shaved in a few days, his jaw and chin covered by at least a week's worth of stubble. The button-down white shirt he wore under his jacket even looked rumpled.

"Good to see you, Trent," Cabe called out.

No response.

Tom hopped inside, pressed the button that Alana knew would release the chair. With the ease of someone who'd done the same thing a million times, the driver spun the seat around toward them, the longtime rodeo hero suddenly face-to-face with the small crowd that had gathered to greet him.

"Welcome to New Horizons Ranch," Rana repeated happily.

Still no response.

"Long time no see," Cabe added softly.

The cowboy didn't look at them. Didn't so much as lift his head. Not a muscle twitched.

Tom pushed the wheelchair onto the lift. Sunlight illuminated Trent Anderson's form. Still the same broad shoulders. The same narrow midsection. He wore a denim jacket over the white shirt and matching denim jeans, looking for all the world like the Trent from TV. It was the legs that looked different. They hung limply in front of him. And, of course, there was no horse.

"Don't expect much of a conversation from him," said Tom. "He hasn't said two words since I fetched him from the airport. Starting to think he lost his voice along with the use of his legs."

That got a reaction.

"I can still walk," Trent muttered.

Barely, from what she'd heard. Rana had filled her in based on internet accounts. Partial paralysis of both legs from midthigh down. He'd hurt his back. There'd been talk he'd never walk again. Or ride. The fact that he had some feeling in his upper legs was a miracle, she'd been told.

"I'll show you to your cabin, Mr. Anderson," Rana said, coming forward to take over for the driver. "Don't

touch me." Both Tom and Rana leaned back.

"I can do it myself." His hands grabbed the wheels, spinning the aluminum frame expertly around.

Alana took one look at Rana's crushed face and jumped in front of the man.

"You have no idea where you're going." She placed her hands on her hips and dared him to try to run her down.

"I'll find my way."

He swerved around her. She jumped ahead again. "You'll stay right here while we fetch your bags." For the first time, steel-gray eyes met her own. "There's only one. Put it in my lap."

Put it in my lap.

As if she was some kind of lackey or something.

She met Cabe's gaze, then looked over at the bus driver. They both stared at her with a mix of surprise and dismay. Tom held a small black duffel bag. She motioned for him to toss it in her direction, and when he did, immediately rebounded it into the cowboy's lap.

"First cabin on the left." She stepped to the side. "Don't let the front door hit you in the ass."

Three stunned faces gazed back at her, though she didn't bother looking at Trent again. Yeah, she might have sounded harsh, but something about the man instantly drove her nuts.

Jerk.

Too bad she would have to put up with him for three weeks.

She heard him set off, the wheels of his chair crunching on the gravel. Using the main road, it was a long, long way to the cabins, through the parklike area that surrounded the old ranch house, down past the trees where they thickened up, then down a small hill to the left where the road opened up and the cabins sat—eight of them—the lodge-pine dwellings to the left and the Feather River to the right. That was why Rana had offered to show him the way. Using the road, one part was pretty steep. Sure, she'd probably hoped to talk to him about roping, too. Guess that wasn't going to happen. With any luck maybe he'd make a wrong turn and end up on somebody else's property.

Now, now, Alana. You need to be nice. Obviously, the guy has issues.

Yeah, and those issues were now their problem. Great.

"Thanks for bringing him out here," she said to Tom, her mock smile indicating she felt anything but gratitude.

She turned back to Trent. "Hey," she called out to the cowboy who, surprisingly enough, stopped, though he didn't look back. "Welcome to New Horizons Ranch."

She saw his fists clench and would bet her favorite bay gelding that he did so to keep from flipping her off.

She smiled.

He turned back just in time to catch it. "Thanks" was all he said before setting off again. "He's never going to make it all the way down there without some help," she heard Rana mutter. "I know," Alana said.

"He probably thinks the guest quarters are nearby," the girl added.

"He'll learn otherwise soon enough," Alana muttered.

"Should I tell him about the footpath behind the barn?" Rana asked. "That's a much safer route for someone in a wheelchair."

Alana glanced at Cabe, and when she saw the small smile alight upon his face, said, "I think we'll let him figure things out on his own."

So it was that all three of them watched as the stubborn man moved farther and farther down the road, completely oblivious to the fact that there was a special trail for people with disabilities. But Alana figured if she mentioned the trail she'd probably upset him even more. She could tell he was the type of man who didn't like the "disabled" label at all.

"You think he'll stay the whole three weeks?" Rana asked, and Alana noticed she had tears in her eyes. Poor girl's feelings were hurt.

Alana heard Cabe huff. "I think we'll be lucky if he lasts three days."

Alana gave him twenty-four hours.

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