



A Rancher for Their Mom (Rodeo Heroes)

By Leann Harris

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Cowboy for Hire

Cowboy Joel Kaye has ambitions as big as Texas. And after decades away, rodeo glory seems finally within reach. But when two little boys "hire" him to work on their ranch, Joel can't turn them down. He tells himself it's only for one week, but widow April Landers and her family soon begin to fill a void in the rodeo rider's scarred heart. April lives for her three kids—and the ranch she's fighting fiercely to keep. This determined mama's not looking for another wandering partner. Will this ready-made family inspire Joel to put down roots...for good?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Leann grew up in the Rocky Mountains but married a Texan, who loved those mountains. So cowboys, horses, ranches and rodeo are familiar themes to her. She taught deaf high school students math and science. She loves gardening and flower arranging. She is a cancer survivor and counts everyday precious.

Leann is the mother of two children and one grandbaby and two granddogs.

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"Mom, Mom," six-year-old Todd yelled, the back screen door slamming against its frame. The sound of little cowboy boots pounded through the kitchen and down the hall. "Where are you, Mom?"

"I'm in the office," April Landers answered.

The screen slammed again, followed by another set of small boot falls. April winced, hoping the boys didn't wake their younger sister from her nap.

Breathless, Todd appeared in the doorway. "Wes told me no one born in February could be a cowboy. Only boys born in June could be cowboys. That's not true, is it?"

Eight-year-old Wes appeared behind his brother, a smirk on his face. April's brow arched as her gaze engaged her older son. His grin disappeared.

"I can be a cowboy, too, can't I?" Todd pleaded.

"Opa and your cousin Chad have birthdays in February. Weren't they cowboys?"

Todd's frown disappeared and his eyes widened. "Yes." He turned to his brother and stuck out his tongue.

Wes's expression went from somber to a grin. He shrugged.

"Ha, you're wrong. I can be a cowboy, too." Todd stomped back down the hall.

Wes turned to follow his brother.

"Stop, young man."

Wes halted, his shoulders hunching.

April pushed away from the antique desk. "Come here."

He looked up and she motioned her son to her side. Wes dragged his feet as if going to an execution and stopped when he got to her knees. He refused to raise his head.

"Wes, look at me."

Her son slowly raised his head.

"Why did you tell your brother he couldn't be a cowboy?"

He shrugged his shoulders, kicking an imaginary piece of dirt on the floor.

April sighed. She knew her boys missed Opa—their grandfather Vernon—who had died last September. "Do you think Opa would've liked you telling that story to your brother?"

He hung his head. "No. He wouldn't have liked it."

"I didn't like it, either. I'm disappointed with you."

Wes's lips pursed.

"Come closer."

He moved and April drew him into her arms and hugged him. All sorts of emotions bounced around her chest.

The boys needed a male figure in their lives to help and guide them since Opa's death. Their father had died in an oil platform accident over three years ago. April's own father couldn't fill the role, since he still worked on an oil platform out in the Gulf. He was the manager and only made it back to shore once every six months.

"I don't want you to lie to your brother again. He looks up to you."

Wes scuffed his boot. "I was just playing."

"Would you like some of the older boys at school to tease you like that?"

He shook his head.

"You can go outside and play if you boys have finished your chores."

Wes pursed his lips. "We were almost finished when Todd told me he wanted to be a cowboy like Jimmy Rogers's dad. You know that Jimmy's dad is going to compete in the rodeo next week? Could we go? Please?" His eyes filled with hope and longing.

"We'll see."

His expression fell and his lower lip jutted out. "Kay."

Wes's posture, slumped shoulders and dragging feet tore at her heart.

The rodeo was in town, but the competition would take place next weekend. April wished she had the extra money to buy tickets to take the boys to see it. It just wasn't in the budget. Money was tight, which was why she'd decided to sell the two horses her father-in-law had raised for the rodeo. They were a little young, and if she could've held out until December, it would've been better, but she couldn't afford the extra money

needed for the horses' upkeep.

Even with the money woes and problems the ranch faced, she wouldn't change a thing about her life—except having her late husband's vision of the future match hers. With all the traveling her family had done as she was growing up, this little piece of Texas in the Panhandle was her ideal spot. Roots. A place to belong. Waking up every day in the same place. That was paradise.

Ross had never understood that need for a home she could live in 24/7, 365 days a year. "Lord, I'm feeling a little overwhelmed here. Could You send me some help?"

The baby cried, alerting April that her few minutes of reprieve were over.

Joel Kaye turned his truck and the rodeo's horse trailer down the private road of the Circle L Ranch. At the end of the gravel drive stood a single-story white clapboard ranch house, with a deep front porch that shaded the house in the late afternoon and a porch swing that swayed in the breeze. A faded red barn stood to the right of the house, opening onto a large area where an old truck was parked.

Like the lightning strike that had taken out the electronics at his family's ranch a couple of springs ago, a longing for home shot through him, leaving him off balance. Shaking off the weird feeling, Joel pulled to a stop before the barn entrance. By the time he slammed the truck door shut, two little boys had barreled out of the barn's double doors and skidded to a stop. They looked at him, then each other.

"Hello, I'm looking for Mrs. April Landers."

The boys eyed him, making Joel feel like a horse ready to be auctioned.

"That's our mom," the taller boy answered. "Do you want to talk to her?"

"I do. Could you get her?"

The boy cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Mom, there's someone out here who wants to talk to you!"

Joel fought back a grin. That wasn't exactly how he'd expected the boy to get his mother, but Joel understood.

Their sharp gazes roamed over him, and Joel saw the questions on their faces. They looked at the horse trailer beside him.

"You with the rodeo?" the older child asked. They huddled together, waiting.

"I am."

"What do you do?" the older boy asked. "I help around the rodeo with chores. I also compete in events."

"What events?"

"Calf roping, bareback riding and steer wrestling."

"When's your birthday?" the younger boy piped up, stepping forward.

Joel's brow wrinkled. "March. I had a birthday last week." He'd turned thirty-four and felt every day of his age.

The younger boy turned to his brother. "See, you're wrong." His words were a singsong *na, na, na*. He moved to Joel's side. "What's your name?"

Joel squatted to get eye level with the boy. "My name is Joel Kaye. What's yours?"

"I'm Todd and that's my brother, Wes, who doesn't know nothin'."

Obviously, Joel had landed in the midst of an argument. "It's nice to meet you."

"What are you doing here?" Todd persisted.

"I'm here to talk to your mom."

"Why?" Wes demanded.

"Do you do bull riding?" Todd asked, scooting closer, leaving Joel no time to answer his brother's question.

Holding up his hand, Joel motioned for quiet. "I'll answer your questions, but I need to talk to your mom."

"Mom," the older boy bellowed again.

The boys seemed to vibrate with excitement.

"So, are you two rodeo fans?"

Their heads moved like bobblehead dolls.

"I love the bareback riding," Todd added, his eyes filled with eagerness. "And bull riding."

"You've got to be mighty strong to ride those bulls," Joel warned. His first time on the circuit he'd tried bull riding and caught a hoof on his upper arm and had six stitches. Now he only rode horses.

Todd's eyes widened. "I know, but I can. I do calf scramble now."

"I'm impressed." Joel remembered the first time he'd managed to rope the gatepost of the corral behind his family's barn. He'd been about Todd's age and his father had witnessed the event.

The back door slammed, bringing his attention to the woman exiting the house. Several strands of her soft brown hair, piled on her head, hung around her face, giving her the look of a woman who cared for and chased after small children. Tall and slender, there was a quiet strength in her that drew him, something none of the flashy women hanging around the rodeo had. She had a little girl riding on her hip.

Joel stood and tipped his hat to her. "Ma'am, Joel Kaye. I'm here to pick up the horses you wanted to sell to the rodeo."

"Mom, you're not going to sell our horses, are you?" Wes asked, racing to her side. A note of fear laced his voice.

"No, I'm not going to sell Buckwheat and Sammie." His rigid posture eased.

"I'm selling Sadie and Helo. You know Opa planned on selling them to the rodeo."

Todd's posture didn't ease, broadcasting his distrust.

"Really?" Wes eyed his mother.

April cupped her son's chin. "Really. Your grandfather gave you Buckwheat. He's yours, and Sammie is your brother's horse. I will not sell them."

Wes studied her. "Okay."

Turning to Joel, she waved him forward. "C'mon, I'll show you where the horses are."

"Did you know he calf ropes in the rodeo?" Todd hurried after his mother. "And his birthday is in March," Todd added, sticking his nose up in a see-I-told-you-so-attitude.

Joel caught her smile.

"It's a long story." She turned and walked to the corral behind the barn and pointed out the black horse with the star on her forehead and the tan horse with a darker brown mane and two front stockings. "Sadie and Helo are the two my father-in-law thought would work well in the rodeo."

Her words sent his mind off in a different direction. Her father-in-law. Jack Murphy had told him that the Landerses had supplied animals for the rodeo for several years.

"I hadn't planned on selling them so soon, but the drought being as severe as it has been, I couldn't afford to keep them another six months."

The little girl in April's arms smiled at Joel and shyly laid her head on her mother's shoulder.

He winked at her and she turned her face in to her mother's body.

"Well, I know Jack is glad to have the stock. I'll go get some halters out of the trailer." The boys huddled around their mother.

"Can I help?" Todd asked, coming out from behind his mother's leg.

April visibly tensed.

"Of course. I could use some help."

A sigh of relief escaped her. Todd beamed and followed Joel to the trailer. As they were walking away, Joel paused and waved Wes toward them. "I could use your help, too. I have two halters, one for each horse."

Wes's face lit. "Okay." He looked at his mother. "I'm going to help."

April's stance eased and she smiled. "I heard, and I know you can help, too." Beaming with pride, Todd and Wes trailed behind Joel.

Thank you, she mouthed.

Joel nodded. Together they moved to the trailer. He opened the back door and walked into the divided interior. Two ropes sat on the floor. Joel handed each boy a rope and watched as they slipped them up their arms, holding the coiled ropes close.

Joel left the doors to the trailer open. "Okay, guys, let's go get those horses." The boys grinned at him and followed.

Hearing the boys walking behind him brought a smile to Joel's lips. His gaze collided with April's. Her expression, a curious mixture of caution and appreciation, caught him off guard. Did she think he'd be cruel to her boys? Ignore them? But then again, she didn't know him from Adam. Joel found himself admiring the mama bear, determined to protect her cubs.

"How contrary are the horses?" Joel threw the question over his shoulder.

"They're not broken, but both can be won over with a carrot."

He stopped and turned to her. "Good idea. Do you have some?"

"Some?" Her brain short-circuited.

"Carrots."

April's cheeks heated and she felt dumber than dirt. "Yeah, I'll get them." She turned toward the kitchen with Cora still cradled in her arms. The toddler protested and held out her arms to the cowboy. April stared down at her daughter. "Sweetie, he doesn't want to hold you." She turned toward the house, but Cora put up a fuss.

April frowned at her daughter's behavior. Lately, Cora wasn't willing to let any stranger near her.

"I don't mind holding her while you get the carrots."

Joel's words startled her. He didn't look frightened or uncomfortable about holding the two-and-a-half-year-old.

Cora leaned toward the tall cowboy, still holding out her arms. He wrapped his hands around her daughter and settled her close to his chest.

Cora batted her lashes at him, instantly winning him over. April struggled to keep her mouth from falling open. Suddenly her picky daughter decided to be friendly.

"I think we've got everything under control here, except for the carrots."

The stupor that held April in place evaporated. She turned and hurried into the kitchen. What was going on?

Suddenly her children had latched on to this stranger while she acted like a teenager, with her heart fluttering in excitement. She wasn't that green anymore.

Grabbing the carrots out of the refrigerator, April fought to regain her balance. She'd just prayed for some help, but surely he wasn't it. God knew her hurts and past, and this cowboy fit none of her needs. Joel worked for the traveling rodeo, which was in a different city each week. He probably had that same wandering gene her father and husband had had. She'd had enough of *that* and wanted nothing to do with a man who couldn't commit to one place.

Hurrying outside, she stopped short when she saw all three of her children surrounding Joel, talking to him. They looked so perfect together. Just looking at the group, one would never know the children weren't his.

It stole her breath.

The sound of the screen door slamming brought everyone's attention to her.

"Here are the carrots." She held them up and hurried down the side steps, shaking off her fantasies. Obviously, she'd been alone too long and any help she got was bound to throw her off stride.

But I prayed.

Arriving beside Joel, April held out her arms for Cora. Her daughter didn't budge. "C'mon, sweetie." Cora didn't respond.

April felt her cheeks grow hot. She smiled and plucked Cora out of Joel's arms. "If you're half as good with horses as you are with kids, Sadie and Helo shouldn't be any problem for you."

The tall cowboy smiled slowly. "I'm better."

She swallowed hard. *Oh, my.*

Joel took the carrots and walked to the corral gate.

"What are you goin' to do?" Todd asked, following Joel. "Are you going to rope Helo and Sadie?"

"I'm going to make friends with a couple of nervous horses." He held out his hand and took the ropes from Wes and Todd, hanging them over the gatepost. He opened the gate and walked inside but made no move toward the horses. Helo and Sadie nervously moved to the other side of the corral.

The boys crowded around the gate, hanging on to the horizontal brace. April moved behind them.

"Sometimes you just have to let a horse get to know you." He placed one carrot in his back pocket and held out the other one. "Let them feel you, catch your scent."

"Is that why you're just standing there doing nothin'?" Wes asked. "I thought you'd charge in there and rope the horses."

"I could, but if I came into your house and started demanding things from you, you wouldn't like it, would you?"

Todd's face screwed up as he thought. "No."

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