



## The Last Cowboy Standing (Colorado Cattle Barons)

By Barbara Dunlop

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Danielle knows getting involved with a rogue like Travis will only lead to heartache. Her career in question, she should be thinking with her head, not the heat of their kisses. But when all roads lead back to Colorado—and Travis—resistance is futile. Will she finally manage to lasso the last cowboy standing?

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Barbara Dunlop has written more than forty novels for Harlequin Books, including the acclaimed COLORADO CATTLE BARONS series for Harlequin Desire. Her sexy, light-hearted stories regularly hit bestsellers lists. Barbara is a three time finalist for the Romance Writers of America's RITA award.

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Travis Jacobs could do anything for eight seconds. At least, that's what he told himself every time he climbed up the side of a bull chute. Tonight's Vegas crowd was loud and enthusiastic, their attention centered on the current rider being bucked around the arena by Devil's Draw.

Putting the other cowboys in the competition from his mind, he looked at Esquire below him, checking for any sign of agitation. Then he rolled his cuffs up a couple of turns, pulled his brown Stetson low and tugged a worn, leather glove onto his right hand.

The crowd groaned in sympathy a mere second before the horn sounded, telling Travis that Buckwheat Dawson had come off the bull. Up next, Travis swung his leg over the chute rail and drew a bracing breath. While Karl Schmitt held the rope, he adjusted the rigging and wrapped his hand. Wasting no time, he slid up square on the bull and gave a sharp nod to the gate operator.

The chute opened, and all four of Esquire's feet instantly left the ground. The Brahma shot out into the arena then straight up in the air under the bright lights. The crowd roared its pleasure as the black bull twisted left, hind feet reaching high, while Travis leaned back, spurred, his arm up, muscles pumped, fighting for all he was worth to keep himself square on the animal's back.

Esquire turned right, twisting beneath Travis, shaking him as if he was a bothersome gnat. Three seconds turned to four. Travis's hand burned against the rope, and his wrist felt like it was about to dislocate. The strain sent a branching iron along his spine, but he also felt completely and totally alive. For a brief space of time, life was reduced to its essence. Nothing mattered but the battle between Travis and the bull.

Esquire made an abrupt left turn, nearly unseating Travis, but he kept his form. His hat flew off into the dust. The blaring music and the roar of the crowd disappeared, obliterated by the pulse of blood pumping past his ears.

The horn sounded just before Esquire made one final leap, unseating Travis, sending him catapulting through the air. Travis summersaulted, grazing the bull's left horn, quickly twisting his body to avoid hitting the ground head-on. His shoulder came down first, with his back taking the brunt of the impact. As the air whooshed out of his lungs, a face in the crowd danced before his eyes.

Danielle? What the heck was Danielle doing in Vegas?

Then Esquire's menacing form filled his vision, and he leaped to his feet. Corey Samson, one of the bullfighters, jumped between them, distracting the animal while Travis sprinted to the fence.

Glancing back, he realized Danielle had to be a figment of his imagination. The crowd was nowhere near close enough for him to recognize a particular face. He heaved himself over the top of the fence and jumped to the ground on the other side.

"Nice one." Buckwheat clapped him good-naturedly on the back.

"Hey, Travis," Corey yelled from inside the arena.

Travis turned to see Corey toss him his hat. He caught the Stetson in midair, and Corey gave him a thumbs-up.

"Ninety-one point three," the announcer cried into the sound system.

The crowd roared louder, while lasers and colored spotlights circled the arena, the music coming up once more. Travis was the night's last rider, meaning he'd just won ten thousand dollars.

He stuffed his hat on his head and vaulted back over the fence onto the thick dirt, waving to the crowd and accepting the congratulations of the clowns and cowboys.

"You have *got* to go pro," Corey shouted in his ear.

"Just blowin' off some steam," Travis responded, keeping his grin firmly in place for the spectators, knowing he'd be projected onto the Jumbotron.

His older brother, Seth, had recently been married, and he'd committed his next three years to working on the Lyndon Valley railway project. Responsibility for the family's Colorado cattle ranch now rested completely on Travis's shoulders. Faced with that looming reality, he'd discovered he had a few wild oats left to sow.

"You could make a lot of money on the circuit," said Corey.

Travis let himself fantasize for a minute about going on the road as a professional bull rider. The image was tantalizing-to be footloose and fancy free, no cattle to tend, no ranch hands, no bills, no responsibilities. He'd ride a couple of times a week, hit the clubs, meet friendly women. There were no bleak, dusty, hick towns on this particular rodeo circuit. It was all bright lights and five-star hotels.

For a moment, he resented the lost opportunity. But he forcibly swallowed his own frustration. If he'd wanted to be a bull rider, he should have spoken up before now. While his brother and sisters were all choosing their own life paths, Travis should have said something about leaving the ranch. But it was too late. He was the last Jacobs cowboy, and somebody had to run the place.

A small crowd had gathered in the middle of the arena to celebrate his win. He unzipped his flak jacket to circulate a little air. Then he accepted the prize buckle and the check from the event manager and gave a final wave of his hat to the crowd.

Mind still mulling what might have been, he turned and fell into step beside Corey, their boots puffing up dust as they moved toward the gate.

"How long have you been on the road?" he found himself asking the bullfighter.

"Nearly ten years now," Corey responded. "Started when I was seventeen."

"You ever get tired of it?"

"What's to get tired? The excitement? The adventure? The women?"

Travis stuffed the check in his shirt pocket. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know. When I get tired of the wheels turning, I go back to the folks' place in New Mexico for a while."

"Ever tempted to stay there?" Travis was trying to reassure himself that life on the road got old, that all men eventually wanted a real home.

Corey shook his head. "Nope. Though, last trip home, there was this pretty red-haired gal living down the road."

Travis chuckled at the yearning expression on Corey's face. "I take it she's calling you back to New Mexico?"

"Not yet, but likely soon. She's got some kind of a bullfighter fantasy going on inside that head of hers, and she's decided I'm the fire she wants to play with."

Travis burst out laughing.

Corey grinned and cocked an eyebrow.

"No pretty women calling me back to my hometown." There was nothing calling to Travis except cattle and horses.

Though, for some reason, his thoughts moved back to Danielle. But she wasn't from his hometown, and she sure wasn't any young innocent. She was twenty-eight, only a year younger than Travis. She was a graduate of Harvard Law, a practicing lawyer and probably the smartest, most sophisticated woman he'd ever met. She also flat out refused to give him the time of day.

"Think of that as another reason to go on the road," Corey countered.

"I'm on the road right now," said Travis. There wasn't a reason in the world he couldn't be footloose for the next few days.

He'd earned it, and he had a check in his pocket just itching to get spent.

"That you are." Corey clapped him on the back. "Let's hit the clubs and show off that new buckle of yours. I bet there are dozens of gorgeous ladies out there just dying to hear how you rode the bull a full eight seconds, and how I saved your life in the arena."

"Is that how you're going to play it? That you saved my life?"

"Damn straight," said Corey.

There were two men in the world Danielle Marin wanted to avoid. Unfortunately, both of them had turned up in Vegas.

She was attending an international law conference, so she'd been on alert for Randal Kleinfeld. It seemed likely the wunderkind D.C. attorney would show up for a lecture by his university mentor Stan Sterling. But Travis Jacobs had come out of left field, literally.

She'd been blindsided when the announcer called his name at the bull riding show, then mesmerized when the bucking bull burst from the chute. Travis made it look effortless, as if he'd been born on the back of a Brahma. That he'd won should have come as no surprise to her. When it came to all things ranching and rough stock, Travis was a master. Stone-faced and rugged, tough and no-nonsense, he was the absolute antithesis of the smooth-talking, urbane Randal.

Show over, and back at the conference hotel with her friends, Danielle couldn't help but ponder the differences between the two men. Travis sticking in her mind, she took a bracing swallow of her vodka martini.

"That's the spirit, Dani," called Astra Lindy from across the table, raising her cosmo in a mock toast.

"I told you it would be fun," said Nadine Beckman as she accepted a frozen Bellini from their waitress.

The four women were less than a mile from the bull riding arena, relaxing in the lobby lounge. The temperature was mid-seventies, a light breeze blowing in from the hotel pool and the gardens.

"It was a blast," Odette Gray agreed with an enthusiastic nod. "Cowboys have the sexiest butts." She'd gone with a light beer.

The other two women laughed. Danielle smiled, keeping her expression lighthearted, even as she called up a mental image of Travis walking away. It simply wasn't fair. How could so much sexiness be wrapped up in such an exasperating man? And what kind of character flaw made her want him?

She took another healthy sip of her drink, regretting that she'd let her three friends talk her into the bull riding excursion. It had seemed like a harmless diversion after a full day of conference topics like Comparative Legal Systems and Cross Border Taxation. And it should have been a harmless diversion. Who could have predicted that Travis Jacobs would choose this week to leave Lyndon Valley and show up in Vegas?

"I'd do a cowboy," Nadine brazenly declared.

"In a heartbeat," Odette agreed.

"Up close, they're dusty and crude," Danielle pointed out, speaking to herself as much as to the other women. "They talk slow, use short sentences, very small words."

"Crude can be sexy," said Nadine. "And the dust washes off."

Sadly, deep down in her secret heart of hearts, Danielle agreed. She'd once seen Travis after he'd cleaned up. The result had made her gasp for breath, and put her libido into overdrive.

"Dani knows cowboys," said Astra. "She spends a lot of time in Colorado."

"I wouldn't call it a *lot* of time," Danielle corrected.

Truth was, she avoided Lyndon Valley as much as possible. The Jacobs spread was right next to the Terrell ranch. And Caleb Terrell was one of her major clients. He lived in Lyndon Valley only part-time, so she could usually arrange to put in her hours for Active Equipment at his Chicago head office or at her own law office on the Chicago River.

"Caleb's a cowboy," said Astra. "He doesn't use small words."

"I was generalizing," Danielle admitted.

On a night like tonight, she needed to take every opportunity to remind herself there was a world of difference between her and Travis Jacobs. She was closer to Randal in background, values, temperament and, of course, profession.

She'd dated Randal in law school, breaking up with him at graduation when he secured a prime internship in D.C. and she had accepted the offer in Chicago. He'd wanted to stay together, but she knew it wouldn't work out. Long-distance relationships never did. Plus, she hadn't been convinced he was *the one*. He was close, and she couldn't exactly say what was missing. But her instincts had told her to end it.

Randal had not been happy with the split. Not that he had anything to complain about the way things turned out. He was rising fast on the D.C. legal scene. The firm he worked for, Nester and Hedley, had clients that included senators, congressmen and captains of international industry. Danielle's Chicago job was bush-league by comparison.

Which made it strange that a partner from Nester and Hedley had contacted her last week, making her an offer that was all but impossible to refuse. She could only assume Randal had a hand in it, and she didn't know whether to thank him or berate him.

The job would give her a chance to build toward an equity partnership in a prestigious, cutting-edge firm. Any lawyer would jump at that. But she didn't want to be beholden to Randal. And she didn't want to date him again. Maybe she was being ridiculously conceited, but she couldn't help but wonder if that would turn out to be part of the package.

"Good evening, ladies," drawled a male voice.

She glanced up to see a vaguely familiar man in a black cowboy hat, a blue-and-green Western shirt and faded blue jeans. A split second later, she caught sight of Travis slightly behind him, worn Stetson low on his brow, face tanned brown, a challenging glint in his cobalt eyes.

She was honestly too tired for this.

"Are you from the rodeo?" asked Nadine, glancing from one to the other.

"We are," the stranger answered.

Astra pointed to Travis. "He's the guy who won, isn't he?"

"Are you a bull rider, too?" Nadine chirped to the other man.

"I'm a bullfighter."

"So, one of the clowns?" she asked.

"There's a big difference between a clown and a bullfighter, ma'am. For example." He jabbed this thumb toward Travis. "I saved this guy's life tonight."

"I saw that," Odette put in knowingly.

"Nice buckle." Nadine had turned her attention and her brilliant smile to Travis. She reached out and touched the shiny, gold and silver prize at his waist.

Danielle couldn't help but roll her eyes at the bling. Really? He had to wear it?

"This is Travis Jacobs," the stranger introduced, removing his hat. "He's tonight's bull riding champion. And I'm Corey Samson, bullfighter extraordinaire."

"Did he really save your life?" Odette asked Travis on a note of awe. Danielle knew the question was more about flirting than any true amazement at Corey's feat.

Corey looked to Travis and waited.

"He most certainly did," Travis acknowledged staunchly. "Bullfighters are highly skilled, highly trained, and among the bravest men on the planet."

The word *wingman* flitted through Danielle's brain. Travis was trying to help his friend pick up Odette.

Nadine turned to her. "That wasn't short sentences and small words."

Travis's challenging gaze turned on Danielle. It was clear he remembered her using that particular phrase in the past.

"It was a generalization," she repeated, refusing to break eye contact with him.

"That's very impressive," Odette told Corey with an almost comical flutter of her eyelashes.

"Danielle is continuously unequivocal in her elevated specifications for interactive discourse," said Travis, keeping his expression completely neutral.

"How does he know your name?" Astrid immediately demanded.

"We met in Colorado," said Travis.

"Briefly," Danielle pointed out.

"Dance?" Corey asked Odette.



"Love to." She giggled as she came to her feet.

"Dance?" Travis asked Danielle.

"Too busy with my drink," she responded airily, lifting her long-stemmed glass.

"I'll dance with you," Nadine chimed in with obvious enthusiasm, holding out a hand.

"Ma'am," Travis answered her, gallantly tipping his hat, taking her hand and helping her to her feet.

"You know a real live bull riding champion?" Astrid asked Danielle as the two couples left the covered deck for the dance floor inside, and Danielle concentrated on *not* looking at Travis's rear end.

"He's not a champion." Danielle went ahead and finished off the martini. "He only does it as a hobby."

"He's pretty good."

"That's what happens when you spend your entire life on a ranch in Lyndon Valley."

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