

Pursued by the Rich Rancher (Diamonds in the Rough Book 2)

By Catherine Mann

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Editorial Review

About the Author
USA Today bestseller Catherine Mann has books in print in more than 20 countries with Desire, Romantic Suspense, HQN and other Harlequin lines. A five-time RITA finalist, she has won both the RITA and the Bookseller's Best Awards. Catherine resides in Florida with her aviator husband, their four children and a menagerie of pets. For more information, visit: http://catherinemann.com

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Nina Lowery just didn't get the cowboy craze.

Good thing she lived in Texas. All the cowboys made it easy to resist falling for any man after her marriage combusted. And never had she been more neck deep in cowboys than today as she accompanied her son to the week-long HorsePower Cowkid Camp.

Nina peeled the back off the name tag and stuck it to her yellow plaid shirt that was every bit as new as her boots. She knelt in front of her four-year-old son and held out the tiny vest with his name stitched on it.

"Cody, you need to wear this so everybody knows which group you're with. We don't want you to get lost. Okay?"

Silently staring, Cody kept his eyes on the ground, so she had a perfect view of the top of his blond buzz cut. He lifted his hands just a hint, which she took as the okay to slide his spindly arms through the vest, leather fringe fanning in the wind. The summer smell of freshly mown hay mixed with the sticky little boy sweetness of perspiration and maple syrup from his breakfast pancakes. Cody had them every morning. Without fail.

They'd been running late today, so he'd eaten his breakfast in the car, dipping his pancake in a cup of syrup. Most of which drizzled all over his car seat. But after waking up at 4:00 a.m. to get ready, then driving from San Antonio to Fort Worth, she was too frazzled to deal with the fallout of disrupting any more of his daily routine. Syrup could be cleaned later.

There were far tougher issues to tackle in bringing up Cody than combating a trail of ants.

She would do anything for her little boy. Anything. Including immersing herself in the world of boots and spurs for seven days. *Yeehaw.*

About a month ago, when her four-year-old's eyes had lit up during a field trip to a farm, she'd been taken aback. He'd been mesmerized by the horses. So Nina had devoted herself to becoming an expert on all things equine related, desperate for a means to break through the walls surrounding her autistic son.

Finding a pathway of communication was rare and cherished when parenting a child with autism.

Never in a million years would she have guessed this particular world would pique Cody's interest. Usually boisterous encounters spun him up, leaving him disoriented and agitated. Sometimes even screaming. Rocking. His little body working overtime to block the excess stimuli.

But he liked it here. She could tell from his focus and the lack of tension in his body. She'd only seen him this way while drawing. He was a little savant with crayons and paint, finding creative canvases from rocks to boxes and, yes, walls. She even had a Monetesque flower mural down her hall.

Apparently he was a horse savant, as well.

She held out the pint-size straw hat and let him decide whether or not he wanted to take it from her to wear. Textures were an iffy proposition for him. The brush of a rough fabric could send him into sensory overload, especially on a day when there were already so many new sights and sounds, horses and humans everywhere. She sidestepped to make way for a father pushing his daughter in a wheelchair, the tyke's arms in the air as she squealed, "Giddyap, Daddy!"

Cody clutched his tiny Stetson in his hands until a long-legged ranch hand strutted past. Standing straight, his eyes tracking the man walking away, her son slid his hat in place and tilted it to the side just like the stable hand he watched. Nina breathed a sigh of relief. She'd made the right decision to come here.

The cowboy camp for special-needs kids was a clear fit for her son. The program had only started this summer, but was already receiving high acclaim. The wealthy McNair family had put their power, influence and money behind launching HorsePower Cowkid Camp on their hobby ranch—Hidden Gem. The bulk of their fortune, though, had been made in their jewelry design house that created rustic Western styles.

Cody toyed with the fringe on his vest, tracing the stamped jewel patterns imprinted in the leather. She reminded herself to stay cautiously optimistic. They'd only just arrived.

She'd learned long ago not to set unrealistic expectations. Life worked better when she celebrated individual moments of success, such as how Cody took steps toward that cowboy. A horse whinnied and her son smiled. That meant more than the hundreds of hugs she would never get.

"Cody, let's walk around and explore. We have a couple of hours to settle in before the first activity." She was used to rambling on to fill the silences. Her son did speak. Just not often. Rather than expecting Cody to answer, she was advised by the speech therapist to accept it as a pleasant surprise when he did and take heart in his advanced vocabulary choices.

Cody held up his hand for her to take and she linked her fingers around his. A rare reach-out. Her heart filled at the chance to touch her child. If Cody wanted the ranch experience, she would follow that broad-shouldered cowboy to the ends of the earth.

Weaving around the other families, she tried not to notice how many of the children were accompanied by two parents. She savored the feel of her son's hand in hers and charged ahead to a corral about ten yards away, on the periphery of the camper chaos.

Multiple barns, cabins and corrals were walking distance from the lodge. Some would call the lodge a mansion—a rustic log ranch mansion with two wings. One wing for vacationers, the other wing for the McNairs' personal living quarters. The place had expanded from a B & B to a true hobby ranch, with everything from horseback riding to a spa, fishing and trail adventures…even saloon-style poker games. They catered to a variety of people's needs, from tourists to weddings.

And now this special needs kids' camp, as well.

She refused to be wowed by the family's power.

She'd walked that path, been too easily blinded by her ex's charm. The thought of a wealthy life of ease with a handsome guy had seemed like a fairy tale and so she'd seen what she wanted to see. But her would-be prince had definitely turned into a toad, taking that fairy-tale ending with him.

Nina skirted past a half dozen children surrounding a rodeo clown passing out toy horses. Childish squeals filled the air.

"I wanna spotted pony."

"Please, please the brown one with a girl rider."

"I wike the one wiff sparkles on the saddle!"

Cody, however, kept his eyes on the cowboy. For the most part, she'd only seen chaps on men in aftershave commercials. Even in Texas they weren't common. This guy's leathers were dusty and worn, the type a man wore to work. A real man. Not an overindulged toad prince like her ex.

So okay, maybe there was something to be said for the cowboy appeal after all.

Cody's cowboy leaped over the split-rail fence in a smooth blend of instinct and strength, his tan Stetson staying firmly in place. He walked with loose-hipped confidence toward a wild horse pawing the ground, nostrils flaring. The animal clearly didn't like the saddle on his back and eyed the approaching man with wariness. The horse danced nervously, shifting uneasy weight from hindquarter to hindquarter, powerful muscles flexing. She felt her son's pulse kick in excitement. So in spite of the tremor of fear in her heart, she stepped closer to the corral.

She'd been thrown once as a child and hadn't been a fan of horses since then. She liked to think she was a person who learned her lesson. Once burned. Twice shy.

Yet the man in front of her showed no fear as he spoke softly to the stressed beast, lulling with his hypnotic voice and gentle strokes. Her stomach gripped just as he slid onto the horse's back.

Pinning his ears back, the horse yanked hard on the reins. Now the animal was well and truly pissed.

Cody tugged his hand free. "Let go."

And she only then realized she'd been squeezing too hard. "Sorry, sweetie."

"Uh-huh." Her son walked closer to the fence, and a different fear took over. Her child had very little sense of danger.

She stifled her own anxiety and stepped closer. "Cody, we have to stay outside the fence to watch. We can't go inside and disturb the man's work."

"Kay… " Her son nodded, enraptured.

The cowboy urged the horse gently forward. The horse bucked hard but had no luck at unseating the skilled

rider. His cowboy hat, however, went flying. The midmorning sun glinted off his head of thick black hair.

The kind of hair a woman could run her fingers through.

The wayward thought hit her as hard and fast as those hooves pounding the ground. She'd never bought into cowboy lore, especially after being tossed on her butt by that supposedly docile pony. Until now. At this moment, she couldn't take her eyes off the smooth flow of the ranch hand's body as he became one with the horse. He rode the frenzy without letting it take control of him, rolling naturally with the unpredictable movements. She understood the restraint and self-control it took to tap in to that Zen state in the face of such outright terror.

She carried fears of her own. Of not being able to care for her son as a single parent. Of trusting a man again after the hell and betrayal her ex-husband had put her through before their breakup and then his death in a motorcycle accident.

Those fears were nothing compared to the terrors her son faced. And the roadblocks.

Somehow she could tell this cowboy understood that fear. Knew how to ride through the moment until peace returned. He had the well-being of the horse in his care in mind at all times. And Cody was mesmerized.

So was she.

Finally—she had no idea how long they stood watching—the horse settled into a restless trot, circling the fenced area, snorting. Nina exhaled in a rush, only just now realizing she'd been holding her breath and secretly rooting for him.

Cody knelt down and picked up the man's hat, shook off the dust and held it out. "Mister. Your Stetson."

Her son's voice came out a little raspy from being used so infrequently. The cowboy tipped his face toward them, the sunshine streaming over.

Oh my.

He'd stepped right off some Wild West movie poster and into her reality. High, strong cheekbones and a square jaw, damn good-looking *power.* She blinked fast against the sting of dust in the air.

He guided the horse to their side of the fence, and her stomach flipped. Because of close proximity to the horse, right?

Ha.

She'd quit lying to herself a long time ago.

The cowboy dipped closer, extending an arm toward Cody. "Thank you, little man." His voice was like Southern Comfort on the rocks, smooth with a nip. "I'm guessing by that vest you're here for camp. Are you having fun?"

"Uh-huh." Cody nodded without making eye contact. "Spectac-u-lar."

Would the man understand? This was a special needs camp, after all.

The cowboy stroked a hand along the horse's neck. "I see you like Diamond Gem. He's a good horse, but too large for you. The camp counselors will start you out with pony rides and before you know it you'll be ready for the big leagues."

Cody shuffled his feet and tugged at the fringe on his vest.

"Thank you," Nina said. "Cody's not very talkative, but he understands all we're saying."

He looked at her, his eyes laser blue. A shiver of awareness tingled through her. Did all of him have to be so damn charismatic?

A dimple tucked into one of his cheeks. "I'm usually not much of a chatty guy myself, actually."

He'd done better with Cody today than her ex-husband ever had. Warren had been a charmer, sweeping her off her feet with extravagant gestures, making her believe in the fairy-tale ending right up until… *rib-bit.* Warren was a shallow, spoiled mama's boy with too much money and too little ambition other than the next thrill. When life got real, when the day-to-day specifics of dealing with their son's autism added up, he'd checked out on the marriage. Then he'd checked out on life altogether in his reckless motorcycle accident.

Cody scuffed his little boots in the dirt, his mouth moving, repeating, "Rodeo man, rodeo man."

The cowboy dipped his head, then nodded. "Back in the day, I was. Not any longer."

Cody went silent, and Nina scrambled for something to say. For her son's sake, of course, not because she wanted another taste of that Southern Comfort drawl saturating her senses. "Then what was that show all about?"

"Just doing my job, ma'am. This was actually a low-key session," he said, his voice washing over her as he sat astride the horse, his muscular thighs at eye level…and his hips. Diamond Gem shook his head up and down, shaking the reins, a reminder that the horse, although calm now, was still unsettled. "Diamond Gem and I have been working together for a couple of weeks."

That was an *easy* session?

"Do you miss the rodeo days?" she found herself asking, unable to stop herself from thinking of all the regrets Warren had lamented over after settling down.

The dusty cowboy scratched under his hat, then settled it back in place. "Let's just say these days I prefer to spend my time communing with the animals rather than performing for people."

"And this horse? You were communing?"

"This fella was confiscated by local animal control for neglect and…" He glanced at her son. "And for other reasons. Releasing him into the wild where he would be unable to fend for himself wasn't an option. So he came here to us where we can socialize him. He's a little green and gun-shy, but we've made progress."

So he'd used the old skills to help this horse. Was he playing on her heartstrings as a part of some camp

gimmick or was he as genuine as those blue eyes? She settled on saying, "That's admirable of you to risk breaking a rib—or worse—to help the horse."

The dimple twitched at his cheek again. "I may have enjoyed myself a little bit. " His eyes dipped down to the name tag stuck to her shirt. "Nina."

Her skin prickled and heat flushed through her at the sound of her name coated in those whiskey tones. What harm was there in indulging in a light flirtation with a regular guy? No risk. She was only here for a week. Although she could be imagining his interest.

It was probably just his job as an employee to be polite to the customers.

"Well, my son certainly enjoyed it, as well. Thank you." She backed up a step. "We should start unpacking or we'll miss the lunch kickoff."

"Wouldn't want that to happen." He touched the brim of his hat. "Y'all have a nice time at the HorsePower Cowkid Camp."

Her skin flushed, heating at the sound of his low and rumbly voice soothing ragged nerves. How strange to be lulled and turned on all at once. But God, how she craved peace in her life. She treasured it in a way she never would have guessed a decade ago.

And watching the lumbering cowboy ride away, she had a very real sense of how smooth and sexy could coexist very, very well in one hot package.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ann Fortune:

Spent a free time and energy to be fun activity to perform! A lot of people spent their down time with their family, or their very own friends. Usually they carrying out activity like watching television, about to beach, or picnic inside park. They actually doing same thing every week. Do you feel it? Do you wish to something different to fill your free time/ holiday? Could possibly be reading a book may be option to fill your cost-free time/ holiday. The first thing that you will ask may be what kinds of publication that you should read. If you want to try out look for book, may be the reserve untitled Pursued by the Rich Rancher (Diamonds in the Rough Book 2) can be very good book to read. May be it could be best activity to you.

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