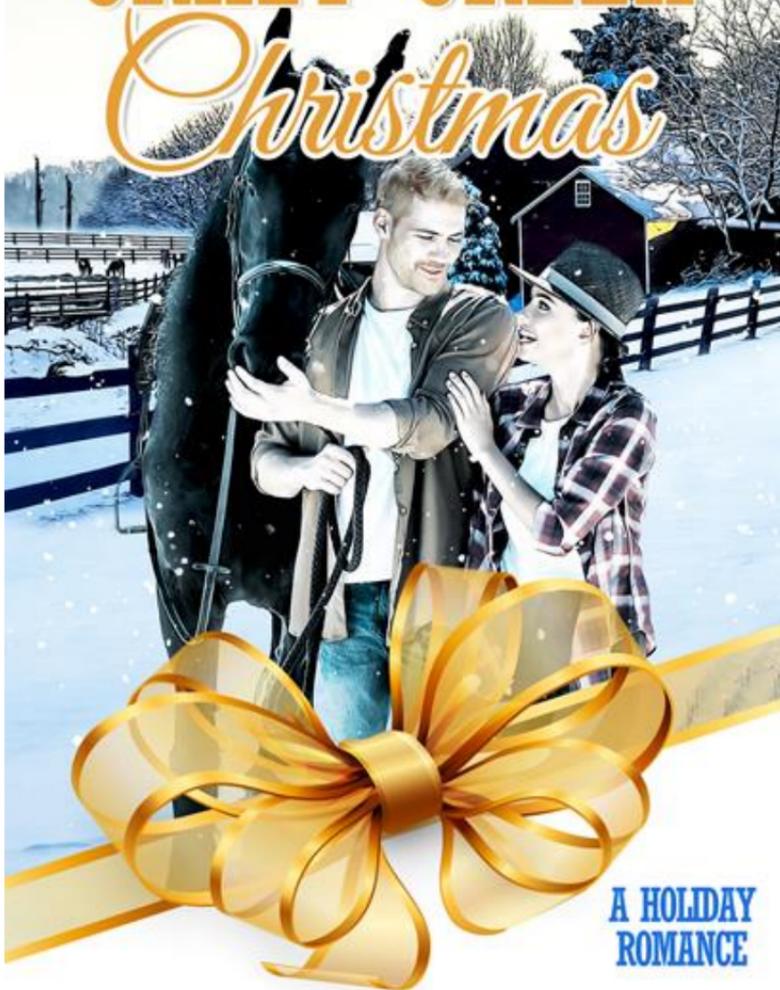


LISA J. LICKEL

CRAZY CREEK
Christmas



A HOLIDAY
ROMANCE

Crazy Creek Christmas

Lisa J. Lickel

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Crazy Creek Christmas
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*Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter,
you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth
you will again bring me up.*

~ Psalm 71:20

1

Leah Meets the Cowboys

October

Cupcake was a liar.

Leah gripped the rusty metal gate with one hand while half-waving, half-pleading to the departing minivan with the other. Cupcake Wimmer and his wife Jeanette drove away from the café on their first real vacation in fifteen years. Leah couldn't fault that. She thanked them for finding her—a stranger to Crazy Creek, Wyoming—a winter job cooking on a working ranch with a small year-round staff, while they figured out if they could stand retirement.

"Lord, You know the plans You have for us," Cupcake had prayed before they let Leah out of the van. "Show her Yours. Help her to settle in. Amen."

Nope, couldn't find fault in that. Someday, Leah might consider retirement...in fifty years, maybe, if she

could afford it. Like going to church. Some day. If she had time. Life at twenty-three so far wasn't headed in that direction.

Leah turned back to the porch of the big, low, rambling log house now occupied by a scowling man piled into a wheelchair like so much pot pie dough. She squinted. Maybe it was the amount of raggedy clothing pooling around him that made him look a part of the machine. His dark hair was over long and messy, and whiskers that could have been sexy had grown too long to be a shadow, too short to be a beard. Only one leg made it over the seat of the chair to meet the footrest. And what hit the footrest wasn't natural.

She looked one last time over her shoulder at the retreating cloud of the Wimmers headed for the border—uh, Arizona—and took in a deep, steadying breath. She pushed open the gate and tried to stride confidently for the porch and, she assumed, her new boss. Temporary boss. Leah could handle anything for a few months. Cooking for cowboys had to be better than dodging lonesome long-haul trucker pinches and a boss who'd fired her for not being friendly enough. Landing in Crazy Creek while headed west from Minnesota had seemed fitting last summer. Until Cupcake mentioned he'd be shutting the café for the winter—the café where she worked baking, packing catering boxes, serving and cleaning up...and slept in the tiny back apartment. She couldn't stay in the back of the empty restaurant, Cupcake told her. They were leaving the utilities at minimum while they were gone...unless Leah could pay...

No, she couldn't.

The Rocking J Ranch a couple miles down Highway 50 happened to need a cook.

Cupcake was a liar. The Rocking J Ranch needed a lot more than a cook. Flower beds surrounding the porch were obscured by tall, dried weeds. The lawn hadn't been trimmed in forever, and out of the corner of her eye, Leah noted honest-to-goodness movie set tumbleweeds blowing across abandoned gravel paths that wound between buildings. Dark clouds decorated the sky, adding to Cupcake's untruth. This atmosphere did not agree with the song lyrics of the sky being not cloudy all day. A snowflake passed before her eyes, followed by a dozen more.

"Old Marty will get in your face a bit at first," Cupcake had warned her. "But you stand up to him, and you'll be fine. Cowboys appreciate the chance to stand up for themselves. Don't mind losing so much, then, see? If they had a chance to prove themselves first, that is. Now, Marty, he's a pipsqueak of a man on land, but on a horse, why he'd rope rings around anyone. Busted too many legs to walk straight and went to the kitchen some years back." Cupcake grinned. Lines of enjoyment of life in general showing on both sides of his mouth. "Ain't the best cook, but it's been his opportunity to contribute. He needs time to recover from pneumonia is all. The Johansens run a good outfit with good people."

Leah appreciated that sentiment. She climbed the first step of the leaf-and-pine-needle-strewn porch. The man in the wheelchair shifted some, but said nothing. Judging by the grimace he wore and the pain paling his deep tan, he also appeared to be suffering. She wasn't a nurse, so she hoped he didn't expect her to take care of him too, even if she had plenty of experience helping her foster siblings.

"Mr. Johansen? I'm Leah Hanes." She held out a

hand for him to shake. He took it and squeezed the tips of her fingers as though working an exercise ball. "Cupcake...um, George, sent me."

The man let go of her hand but still didn't speak. Maybe more than his legs weren't working.

"A-about the j—"

A fit of wet coughing erupted from behind the screen door into the home, which Leah just noticed was open. Inspiration struck. "About helping out around here. Just until...well, you know, until you all can get back on your..."

The screen door slammed open and a spare man strode out. "Huh!" Free-roaming iron corkscrew hair and a drooping mustache overwhelmed the man's face. Leah hunched some so her five-foot-six inch height wouldn't tower over him. For the first time, the man in the wheelchair relaxed his white knuckle grip of the sides. His lips trembled slightly. He met her gaze.

"The truth is, ma'am, getting on our feet would take a miracle." He turned the chair to face the screen door. "Cupcake told me about you," he mumbled. "You might as well come in, but don't expect much."

"I never do," Leah replied, and she followed the men across the threshold.

The inside of the house was exactly what Leah expected: perfection. Dusty, but precisely how she would decorate a log home. A little fusty-smelling, as if it could use a good airing, but otherwise not bad. She wrinkled her nose while swiveling to look every which way. On either side of the great room with a stone fireplace were darkened passages. Exterior walls of the entry and great room had been plastered for insulation she assumed, but the interior walls remained half-rounded and varnished. The light fixtures were classic

brass and glass, and if cleaned of cobwebs and dead bugs, would glow. She scuffed one of the braided rugs on the wood floor and quickly smoothed it back into place with her toe. A wide-planked wooden table posed in an area open on two sides. The walls on either side of the table were glass windows facing a sad kitchen garden one way and a view of the buttes the other. The far side of the table looked as if it opened to the kitchen. The procession stopped at the table. Leah sat gingerly on a crumb-strewn chair. The late afternoon sky threatened to follow through with the predicted "S" word—snow.

"Good time to be skedaddling south," Jeanette had said while they packed the minivan.

The small cowboy sat and leaned over his elbows. Leah struggled not to wheeze with his painful-sounding inhales. More than one of her foster siblings had suffered with asthma.

"I'm Gil, and this is Marty," the man in the wheelchair said. "Manny, Jorge, and Tom stay over in the bunkhouse. Marty's been helping me out since I got back from rehab, but we're gonna move over there, too." A wry cast came over Gil's features. "Seems no one planned for wheelchairs around here. The bunkhouse is on the level and has wide doors. Someone's always on crutches sometime during the rodeo season. My rodeo-in's done, but at least I can get around like a man over there. So you can stay here if you're not afraid to be alone."

Leah nodded cautiously. She was definitely not afraid to be alone. But she had learned not to get too excited until the ink dried.

"There's a good kitchen over at the bunkhouse," Gil said. "But everyone's been eating here lately. We're

done haying for the season. We have just a few acres of beets to get in, but we can manage that. The herd's in winter grazing."

"He means," Marty said, "that there's no crew to cook for." He coughed into his shirt sleeve. "He thinks I can't handle a few meals for a coupla mouths."

After silent permission from Gil, Leah looked Marty in the eye. "You'd be helping me out by letting me stay and work with you for the winter, Mr. Marty. I don't have anywhere else to go right now."

Marty set his face in his crossed arms.

After a few seconds, Gil cleared his throat. "Cupcake said you can cook just fine. Gave you a good reference, though Noel did a background check anyway."

Leah blinked but didn't have time to ask about it before Gil went on. "You passed. We need some help around here, as you can see. There's a contract here for you. Since the position's temporary, we're not giving vacations and such, and your only benefits are room and board and you can visit the same doctor we do if you have a need. We'd cover that. You're to take care of ordering supplies and making and cleaning up after meals..."

A faint moan from Marty made Leah turn her head toward him, but she quickly faced Gil again.

"Wages..."

Were better than Leah expected. She could save up, buy a car that worked, and come spring, if the Wimmers never came back, get to a bigger city and find a real job. Or go to school. Maybe both. Unless this worked out...

"Sorry?" Chagrined, she realized Gil had asked her a question.

"I said, you won't be expecting time off for Christmas?" Gil asked. "We don't count on getting out much at any particular time in the winter. We get a lot of snow up here."

"March-April's been the worst lately," came a muffled warning from Marty.

There went spring. "No. About the holidays, anyway." She shrugged. "I told you before that I have no place to go." And no reason whatsoever to feel anything but bitter about Christmas, but that was no one's business.

For the first time, emotion other than unhappiness traversed Gil's features. Sympathy? Was that...sympathy? For her?

"I was raised in a large foster family," she said. "My foster parents were kind, but busy. We all helped." What else could she say without making it sound too great or too terrible? She'd been one of the older kids, not physically or emotionally splintered, like the last half-dozen kids who'd come and gone at the Fullars' home. Gil's condition didn't faze her.

"You did the cookin', hah, didja?" Marty raised his head. His pale eyes were red-rimmed and watery, like his nose. "Don't mean you can cook for men."

"No one's trying to get rid of you, Marty!" Gil's voice showed his exasperation. "We barely got along while you were in the hospital. If it weren't for Jeanette catering our meals, things would have been bad."

"Don't matter much anyway." Marty returned his face to his splayed, pink and white plaid flannel-covered forearms. "When the place gets chopped up and sold."

Leah stared at the table surface and rubbed her palms against her thighs. Cupcake mentioned that the

ranch owners had died, Gil's parents, she thought she remembered. An accident, which also stole his legs. Cupcake and Jeanette warned her not to get attached. She wouldn't. She'd learned the hard way not to get attached to anything.

"Nothing's been decided for sure," Gil said. "Except we'd like you to work for us this winter, if you think you can handle it. Not many people could, being away from the social life and all. It will be lonely out here, far enough from Gillette to make it a day trip."

"Besides gettin' stuck weeks on end by blizzards," Marty grumped.

"I'm not into the social life much," Leah said. "And I don't mind hanging around."

"Jeanette brought out some of your food. A couple of pies, too, last summer," Gil said.

"Said they were hers," Marty huffed.

"So I know you're good." Gil pulled a manila folder from the side pocket of his chair and opened it. "Here's the contact. If you haven't changed your mind yet, look it over." He pursed his lips and stared into the big room, seemingly haunted by something Leah couldn't name. Under all that gruff, he wasn't so bad. He might even clean up nice if he bothered. She bent her head to study the typed page—just one—for her temporary stopover in life.

Gil kept droning. "Mary had a housekeeper part time cook years ago. Before Bertie grew up and we got married. B-bertie..." He swallowed and swiped at his eyes.

"Sweet Roberta. Dear Mary and Robert." Marty moaned.

What had Leah fallen into? These people were still in mourning, nowhere near ready to resume a hardy

western cowboy's life.

"I taught Miss Roberta to ride," Marty said. "She was the dearest, sweetest little girl."

"Not always." Gil sniffed. "Anyway, like the contract says, we only expect you help out food-wise. You should clean your own room and do your own laundry. I'll show you around more, later on."

Leah closed her mouth and went back to reading. It wasn't up to her to decide whether Gil and Marty were ready or able to run the ranch. If they thought they could, she'd do what she could to help. One day off a week...well, that was nice. She could always store up meals for the men to reheat. There wasn't much required of her, no housekeeping, but she'd go nuts if she didn't have something else to do. There were bound to be a few nice days left of the fall to get out in the yard. And this house needed a good polish. Surely Gil wouldn't object if she...

She slid a sideways glance at Marty, who had taken to staring at her. She quickly returned to the page. The rest was like Gil explained. She picked up the pen Gil set on the table, and scratched her signature and dated it.

"That's that," Marty said.

"Wait a minute." Leah was through listening to a grown man whine—even one who'd recently been sick. Marty's imagined problems cowered in the gargantuan shadow of what Gil had lost. What would Gil do now, anyway, if she let off some steam? Fire her? "I can cook and clean up after a crowd. I can slap a grown man who thinks he can take liberties. I can mop up after sick kids and how to deal with all sorts of injuries and...and...differently-abled people. I can manage a winter without much dancing and

barbecues, but I'll let you know right now that I'm not much of a sunshine committee. I just signed on as temporary help, Mr. Marty. You can think of me like one of the harvesting crew, or whatever, and let me help *you*, or you can hide out and complain. I won't cook better than you, and I won't do everything right all the time, but unless Jeanette Wimmer steered me wrong by telling me the Rocking J outfit was full of the nicest, hardest-working bunch around...kindest..." Leah ran out of words.

Gil laughed quietly and Marty narrowed his eyes. "Jeanette is a good woman."

"Will you teach me about what needs to be done?" she asked.

"Hmm."

A clicking sound came from the kitchen. Keys rattled. Leah drew her brows. One of the other men? She checked Gil's reaction. He'd clammed up. Marty cinched his mouth tight under the mustache and lowered his face again.

A bellow echoed from the kitchen. "It's supposed to start snowing tonight! Nothing's ready!"

Leah twitched at the ominous male tones thundering from the kitchen.

"Did that woman get here yet? I don't want to to haul someone's..."

A black, knee-length coated figure appeared, framed in the space of the passage between dining room and kitchen. The dark-haired man raised his arms to brace himself. "Ah...vehicle...out of the ditch."

For the first and hopefully only time in her life, Leah understood her foster mother's expression of someone walking over her grave.

2

Noel Stands Alone

With the weekend plans in shreds due to a predicted snowstorm, Noel Johansen turned his new car south to the Rocking J. It was not home—hadn't been in years—and he needed to maintain his cool if he wanted to convince his brother-in-law to sell the land.

Gil wasn't the owner, Noel reminded himself as he sped down the highway.

Noel wasn't the Grinch.

But he had sparked some interest with the Equus-Tour people. Thousands of acres to develop trails and training, with homes and rental properties surrounding it. Just like golf courses these days. Crazy people, crazy to live and vacation near horses. This was the first property Equus considered as a home base. If it worked, Noel would be all set to open his own land development office. Equus hinted they would hire Johansen Properties as their scout for other locations.

Gil could keep the house. They could try hiring help for him. Maybe Tom was ready to hang up wrestling steers in exchange for handling Gil. Tom had to be getting up in years.

A snowflake hit the windshield, followed by a spurt of others.

Noel stepped on the accelerator.

He needed to show the property before it was buried under a ton of snow. If Gil had done as he asked, hired help to spruce up the buildings and the yard, he could talk his way through the rest—the cattle on the untillable hills and pond, the acres of alfalfa, the wheat, and the sugar beets his crazy sister had insisted...crazy...gone and buried...

The car slowed. Noel reached for the radio and listened to sports talk until it fizzled out when he reached the buttes. He forgot about the loss of connection out here in the hills of eastern Wyoming. Some places didn't have consistent Internet coverage.

His phone rang. The dashboard ID spelled Carolyn. Noel pushed mute. He wasn't turning around. The month since the breakup of their office romance hadn't changed anything. He didn't need her running clearance, as she called it. Making nice for clients and officials with the power of ink to issue permits to build roads and dig wells and determine lot sizes.

Noel still burned over catching her in the dark with Councilman Tavers.

He turned up the radio with a voice command. Once he had his own name on the stationery, people would come to him for favors. By the time he reached Crazy Creek, he'd worked out a mental plan for the lots and homes he'd develop. The bunkhouse could use a facelift and maybe be rented out for events. The paddocks needed a desperate expansion, and he'd build a new horse barn and training facility right away. Equus-Tours could start booking within a year.

From a distance, Noel noted the ranch mailbox still looked dented and askew on the post. Gil should have

dealt with that. Noel added it to his list of stuff to repair. First impressions meant everything in his business.

His ire rose as his wheels found every rut in the long driveway. The metal gate leading into the yard, which Dad had kept oiled and painted, didn't answer his remote-controlled click. Getting out to open it, drive through, and then close it, didn't improve his disposition. There were no cars visible; in fact, the whole place looked deserted. Where were the new guys Bertie hired a year ago? He drove slowly to the back of the house. Lights were on at the bunkhouse, and Tom's red truck was parked in its usual spot. Noel parked and got out.

Where was everyone? Shep, Marty's mutt, rubbed against Noel's dark slacks. Noel frowned and bent to pat and thrust the dog's nose away. "Hey, boy. Where's your buddy?"

Shep whimpered and limped toward the bunkhouse.

The yard belonged to a ghost town. Accident or no, Gil was supposedly rehabbed, and if he wanted to show he could run this ranch, he'd failed. Things were obviously not working out. It was up to Noel to get their lives back on track. With the sale of the Rocking J he could fulfill his goal of his first banked million dollars before he hit thirty.

Gil would be well taken care of. There were places that provided the kind of services Gil obviously needed. Noel owed the childhood friend who'd followed him home every chance he got and took any dirty job assigned him just to hang out. Later Noel learned it had been for Bertie.

Noel turned to watch the pale orb of sun kiss the

old weathervane on top of the barn. Out of habit he stood, shivering despite his coat, to track the sun's descent for a few minutes. As a boy, he'd marveled at the sight, stopping in this very spot after evening chores and before homework. When Dad could, he'd join Noel. Sundown had been Noel's reward for chores. The horses weren't so bad, even though rodeos scared him, but the cows...hayng...

Bertie had been the one who loved it. Noel couldn't run fast enough.

Now Bertie and their parents were gone, and Noel needed to clean up the mess. Resolutely, he strode into the darkened kitchen. It smelled stale. Voices...ah, so Gil was here. He and Tom should have known enough to get the big tractor ready to plow.

"It's supposed to start snowing tonight!" Noel called. "Nothing's ready!"

Marty had been too sick to do much of anything. Cupcake promised to send help when he and Jeanette went south. Some woman they'd met, someone who could handle being stuck inside for days, would sign on for the winter. Hopefully she hadn't showed, and he could start selling off the cattle. The winter season was wasted time, but if they could save money by not having to pay salary and living expenses, he'd feel better. The roads were bound to get nasty soon. Good thing he'd planned to stay the weekend. Noel pushed through the passage into his mother's dining area.

"Did that woman get here yet? I don't want to have to haul someone's..."

It was Gil's voice Noel heard, but definitely not Gil's face across the big table. Noel amended his language and raised his arms to brace himself against the sides of the doorway. "Ah...vehicle...out of the

ditch.”

Cupcake was a liar.

The vision before him was not some hardened woman used to ranch life and the lonely, harsh conditions of a Wyoming winter.

Jeanette and Cupcake sent a woman several years younger than himself, younger even than his sister. How could she have experience cooking? Noel stared. She was very pretty in a pinched, inexperienced way, with dark blonde hair pulled back from her face in a loose ponytail. She seemed startled, maybe even confused. The opposite of Carolyn in every way.

The folder with the contract was on the table. To one side, Marty rested on the table. To the girl’s other side, Gil huddled in his wheelchair. He’d obviously slid downhill since coming home from rehab last month. It didn’t look as if he’d done anything to keep himself or the place up in the weeks since Noel brought him home. Marty had been sick, Noel knew, but a visiting nurse was supposed to check in on them.

Mom would never have allowed this. Jeanette should have known better. What had she been thinking? The situation had clearly gotten out of control.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” Gil said.

“Clearly.” Noel snapped himself upright and walked in. “What’s going on? The place looks like it’s falling apart. I only left a few weeks ago.”

Gil gave a sideways eye-roll toward the young lady. “What are you doing here?”

“Jeanette and Cupcake sent a message.” Noel hedged. “Where’s the nurse?”

“After the first two weeks I told her she didn’t have to come back,” Gil said.

The young lady turned her face from their exchange. Noel set his hands on his hips. "Excuse me. You're...you're Lady...Laney...La-something?"

The woman raised a brow at Gil, who had turned red.

"This is Leah Hanes. Leah, meet my brother-in-law."

Noel put his hands on the table and leaned forward, trying to get a look at the contract. Gil pushed the papers inside the folder and closed it. "Your car wasn't outside," Noel said. "As you can see, the situation isn't going to work out. Thank you for coming."

"I signed a contract, Mr...Mr. Brother-in-law." Leah's voice was not that of a young, inexperienced or nervous girl.

It was Noel's turn to raise his brow.

Marty finally lifted his head, snuffled, and stared Noel straight on. "She got nowhere else to go. You can't kick a body out when winter's comin'."

The old man probably knew, though Noel never admitted it, how Marty had intimidated Noel. Marty had always been old. Old and tough. A fixture at the Rocking J. As a child, Noel assumed Marty owned the place, even though Noel and his family lived in the bigger house. He'd been eight and Roberta five before he understood the truth that Marty worked for Dad and didn't really have the right to boss Noel. Looking back on his adolescence, Noel wasn't proud at the way he'd treated Marty. Marty taught Roberta to ride and rope in the way Noel couldn't achieve. Roberta brought home the rodeo trophies, taught little kids to love riding, convinced Dad to branch into cash crops, married Gil who even had the right last initial to his

name, and was the heir apparent. Noel hated the dirt and the manure. At college he switched his studies from business to civil engineering and got a job with a property development firm.

Their parents had started the paperwork to establish a trust, but died before their attorney could move everything into it. Across the table, Noel matched Gil's staring challenge, ignoring Marty.

Noel blinked first. "I guess there's not much we can do today. Did anyone check the weather?" He stepped away from the table, grimacing as a cobweb swung gracefully in his direction, swayed by his movement.

Marty rose and turned on the lights. "Not me, but I can turn on the weather radio." He scurried into the kitchen where Noel heard him flicking switches and coughing.

Gil maneuvered his wheelchair adeptly enough back toward the kitchen. "Leah, let me show you to your room."

Apparently his brother-in-law was nuts.

"Wait," Noel said. "If she leaves now, she could make it back to town."

"She?" Leah folded her arms and flared her nostrils. "Look, I don't know what's going on, but in good faith I took a job here. I'm not sure which of you is the rightful owner, but that's irrelevant since I signed a paper that says I have work, a salary, and room and board through next May."

Her voice became sarcastic. "*She* is not going back to town. Even if she had a way to get there, she doesn't have a place to lay her head."

Static followed by the buzz of a weather bulletin and alert sounded from the kitchen. "Blizzard warning