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A Last Chance Christmas (Sons of Chance)

By Vicki Lewis Thompson



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A Christmas kiss from a cowboy...

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Genealogist and academic Molly Gallagher is all about family. And even if Ben's secrets make him as skittish as a wild mustang, there's nothing Molly loves more than an enigma. Especially a ridiculously sexy one! But the magic of Christmas—and the Last Chance Ranch—might not be enough to wrangle a cowboy who can't trust himself...



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Editorial Review

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Vicki Lewis Thompson's love affair with cowboys started with the Lone Ranger, continued through Maverick and took a turn south of the border with Zorro. Fortunately for her, she lives in the Arizona desert, where broad-shouldered, lean-hipped cowboys abound. Visit her website at www.vickilewisthompson.com.

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After battling icy roads all the way from Sheridan, Ben Radcliffe was cold and tired by the time he reached Jackson Hole and the Last Chance Ranch. But adrenaline rather than fatigue made him clumsy as he untied the ropes holding a blanket over the saddle he was delivering to Jack Chance.

Jack, the guy who'd commissioned it for his mother Sarah's seventieth birthday, watched the unveiling. The two men stood in a far corner of the ranch's unheated tractor barn in order to maintain secrecy. They'd left their sheepskin jackets on and their breath fogged the air.

This gift would be revealed at a big party the following night, so to keep the secret Ben was masquerading as a prospective horse buyer. It was a flimsy story because buyers seldom arrived in the dead of winter. But the combination of Christmas next week and a major birthday tomorrow had kept Sarah from questioning Ben's arrival.

The entire Chance family, including a few people who weren't technically related to Sarah, had helped pay for this elaborate saddle. Jack's initial reaction was crucial. Ben hoped to God he'd made something worthy of the occasion.

The last knot came loose. Ben's heart rate spiked as he removed the rope and pulled the padding away.

Jack's breath hissed out. "Wow."

"Good?" Ben dared to breathe again.

"Incredible." Jack moved closer and traced the intricate pattern on the leather.

That tooling had taken Ben countless hours, but he thought it showed well against the walnut shade of the leather. Even in the dim light, the saddle seemed to glow. Silver accents he'd polished until his fingers ached were embellished with small bits of hand-picked turquoise from his best supplier. He'd put his heart and soul into this project.

Jack stepped back with a wide smile of approval. "She'll love it."

"That's what I'm hoping." Ben's anxiety gave way to elation. The biggest commission of his life and he'd nailed it—at least, in Jack's opinion, and that counted for a whole lot.

"I have no doubt she will. It *looks* like her—the deep color of the leather, the classy accents, the tooling—she'll go crazy over this. Everyone will." With a smile, Jack turned and held out his hand. "You

were the right choice for the job. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Ben shook hands with Jack and returned his smile. "I'll admit I haven't truly relaxed since you came to my shop in October. I wanted to get this right."

"You've obviously worked like a galley slave. I'm not a saddle maker, but I can appreciate the hours that must have gone into this."

"A few."

"Oh, before I forget." Jack took a check out of his wallet. "Here's the balance we owe on it. Now that I've seen the saddle, I'm not convinced you charged enough. That's amazing workmanship."

"It's enough." Ben pocketed the check without looking at it, but knowing it was there and that his bank account was healthy felt really nice. "I love what I do and I feel lucky that it pays the bills, too."

"I predict that soon it'll do more than pay the bills. You have a bright future. Once my brothers get a gander at this, I guarantee they'll both be trying to figure out if a new saddle is in their budgets. I know I'm thinking like that."

Ben laughed. "I'd be happy to cut a deal for repeat customers or multiple orders."

"Oh, yeah. Dangle temptation in my face. Thanks a lot." Jack grinned. "Come on, let's cover this up and get the hell into the house where it's warm. We have a heated shed for your truck, too."

"Sounds good." Ben replaced the blanket and together they moved the saddle stand to the far corner of the tractor barn, farther out of sight.

They passed by a sleigh, which had to be the one Jack had mentioned back in October. Jack had been worried that the carpenter wouldn't finish it before the holidays, but there it was, a one-horse open sleigh worthy of "Jingle Bells." Cute.

Ben gestured to it. "I see your guy came through for you."

"Yeah, thank God. And we've already gone dashing through the snow more times than I can count. Everybody loves it. Hell, so do I. The runners are designed for maneuverability. It can turn on a dime."

Ben laughed as he imagined Jack tearing around the countryside with his new toy. "I'll bet."

"You'll have to take it for a spin while you're here," Jack said as they walked toward the front again. "Oh, and I hope you don't mind the white lie that you're here to look at one of our Paints."

"I don't mind, but speaking of that, which horses did you supposedly show me?"

Jack paused before opening the door. "Let's see. How about Calamity Sam? He's a fine-looking gray-and-white stallion, five years old, could be used as a saddle horse and as a stud."

A gray-and-white Paint. The artistic appeal of a horse with a patterned coat fired his imagination. He'd never made a black saddle, but that might look good with the gray and white. "Any others?"

"You could say I tried to sell you Ink Spot, but you liked Calamity Sam better. Then tell everybody that you have to think about it before you make a final decision."

"And why didn't I bring a horse trailer?"

Jack adjusted the fit of his black Stetson. "That's easy. You saw no point in transporting a horse in this God-awful weather, but you were in the mood to go looking. If you decide on Calamity Sam, you'll pick him up in the spring."

"You'd hold him for me that long?"

Jack's brow creased. "We're making this up to fool my mother. It's not real."

"Yeah, I know, but supposing I actually wanted to look at your horses?"

"Ah." Jack's puzzled expression cleared. "Do you?"

"I might."

"Well, then." Jack stroked his chin and his dark eyes took on a speculative gleam. "In that case, maybe we could work out a little trade, one of our horses for some of your saddle-making skills."

"It's a thought." In the back of his mind, Ben was already designing a black saddle with silver accents. "Right now I don't have a place to keep a horse, but that could change."

"Especially if you take a liking to Calamity Sam."

Ben smiled. "Exactly." The idea of posing as a horse buyer on this trip had sparked his interest in actually buying one. He made saddles for everyone else but didn't have one for himself because he didn't own a horse. Stable horses were okay, but he craved a horse of his own with a custom saddle on its back.

"You're staying for a couple of nights, aren't you?"

"Just overnight. This is your holiday, and I don't want to—"

"Hey, you just brought the coolest gift my mother has ever had, so you can stay as long as you want. We have plenty of room."

"Well, if you're sure."

"Absolutely. The only person staying upstairs is Molly, which leaves three empty bedrooms. Cassidy, our housekeeper, is off visiting family, so you might have to fend for yourself. My brothers and I have our own places, now."

"Who's Molly?"

"My cousin from Arizona. She's here to do genealogy research on the family, but she'll go back to Prescott before Christmas. Don't worry. There's plenty of space if you want to stay on and scope out the horse situation. Unless you have to get back."

"I don't have any plans that can't be changed. So thanks for the hospitality. I might take you up on it." Much depended on whether he felt like an interloper once he met the rest of the family. As usual, he had no holiday gatherings back in Sheridan.

He'd never been part of a big family Christmas, and he was curious about whether it would be the way he imagined. But he was a stranger, so he wouldn't really fit in. On second thought, he shouldn't stay. The horse deal, though, was worth considering.

"You should stay at least three nights," Jack said. "I might not have time to show you the horses tomorrow because we'll be getting organized for Mom's party, but the next day I could."

"How about giving me a preview right now?"

"Now? Aren't you ready for a warm fire and a cold beer?"

"Yeah, but how long would it take to wander through the barn?"

Jack gazed at him. "You're right, and I'd be a damned poor salesman if I didn't take you over there right now, especially if you're considering swapping horseflesh for saddles. My brothers would kill me if I screwed that up." Jack opened the door and ushered Ben out into the cold late afternoon.

Darkness approached, and the two-story log ranch house looked mighty inviting with smoke drifting from the chimney and golden light shining in most of the windows. But the barn looked inviting, too, with its old-fashioned hip-roofed design and antique lamps mounted on either side of the big double doors. Each door had a large wreath on it, decorated with a big red bow.

"Well, look at that," Jack said. "My brother Gabe's over at the barn. That's his truck there. I wonder what he's up to."

"Is he the one who rides in cutting-horse competitions?" After Jack's visit to his shop, Ben had done some research on the Last Chance Ranch. He'd heard of the place, of course, but he'd wanted more in-depth information to guide him in his saddle design.

"He is, and I'm sure he'd love a new saddle. But I warn you he's picky as hell."

"I'd enjoy the challenge." Ben looked forward to meeting the other family members, and if any of them wanted saddles, so much the better. He navigated a narrow path that had been cleared between the tractor barn and the horse barn. Knee-high drifts formed a barrier on either side.

He was used to Sheridan, where snowplows kept the streets passable except during the worst storms. Out here, the Chance family had to use their own resources to deal with weather issues. In the barn where the saddle was hidden, he'd even seen a tractor with a plow attached.

Jack opened the barn door and they were greeted with warmth, light and the satisfying aroma of hay and horses. Ben decided that he wanted a barn. He'd need some kind of shelter if he planned to buy a horse. Some folks left horses outside through the winter, but he'd rather have a barn.

He could build a tack room for his saddle and other equipment. If he had more than one horse, he'd make a saddle for each of them. Saddles on horses were like boots on a cowboy. If they didn't fit, no amount of

padding or stretching would make them feel right. He winced whenever he saw a horse with an ill-fitting saddle. Had to feel damned uncomfortable.

A cowboy with a sandy-colored mustache walked down the wood-floored aisle toward them. "Hey, Jack."

"Hey, Gabe. I'd like you to meet Ben Radcliffe. He just brought Mom one hell of a saddle. You should go see it."

Gabe smiled. "Why do you suppose I'm here?" Then he shook Ben's hand. "Good to meet you, Radcliffe. Thanks for making the trip."

"Glad I could."

Jack unbuttoned his coat. "You snuck over here to get a look at the saddle?"

"I didn't sneak. I drove."

"Yeah, well, you'd better have given your kids a good excuse for doing that, especially Sarah Bianca. If she gets wind that there's a secret present for her grandma hidden somewhere on the ranch, we'll hear about it all day long. Mom will get suspicious and the surprise will be ruined for sure."

"I told them I wanted to check on Persnickety. He's been favoring his right front leg."

Jack frowned. "He has?"

"Well, he *was*. Sort of. But guess what? Now he's all better. Is the saddle in the tractor barn?"

"I thought that was the best place. Go all the way to the back in the right-hand corner. There's a blanket covering it. Take a flashlight."

Gabe pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket. "Get with the program, bro. Nobody carries a flashlight anymore. We have an app for that."

"I'm sure you do. I'll keep using my Coleman lantern, which will still be functioning when your teeny battery is DOA."

Gabe laughed and picked up a battery-operated lantern sitting on a shelf. "I just say these things to get your goat, big brother. Works every time."

"Bite me."

"Nah, I've outgrown that. Say, have you done your homework for Molly yet?"

Jack groaned. "Hell, no. Have you?"

"Some of it. The form she gave us is longer than a dead snake. I got bored and quit." Gabe looked over at Ben. "Our cousin from Arizona. She's a history professor by day but a genealogist by night." He turned to Jack. "Which reminds me. Have you told her about the saddle? Morgan wanted me to ask if Molly's in on the secret."

"I haven't told her. I had to get to know her first and find out if she could be trusted to keep quiet. Now I know she's trustworthy, but there hasn't been a good time to say anything when Mom wasn't around."

"Yeah, and that'd be one more person who could slip up accidentally. Morgan seems to think we should tell her, but I say if it's gone this long, might as well not take the risk." He glanced at Ben. "That means as far as Molly's concerned, you're a prospective horse buyer."

"Got it."

"You might not see much of her, anyway," Jack said. "She spends a lot of time on the computer with her genealogy program. Once she has the family tree all completed, she's going to put it into some kind of book for all of us."

"Sounds nice." It also sounded like something done out of love for family. Ben doubted his family would ever create something similar.

Jack sighed. "I suppose it will be, but all the paperwork is a pain in the ass. I tried to get Josie to do it for me. She filled in her part, but she flatly refused to fill in mine."

"Yeah, Morgan wouldn't do mine, either." Gabe glanced over Jack's shoulder as the barn door opened. "Well, if it isn't Nicky. Whatcha doing here, Nick, old boy?"

"Oh, just happened to have a little spare time." Nick walked toward them.

Jack shoved back his hat. "I don't suppose you're here to check out the saddle or anything like that."

"Maybe." Nick smiled and shook hands with Ben. "You must be Radcliffe. I had a look at your website. Impressive work."

"Thanks." Ben's eye for detail took in the similarities among the brothers—same height and build, same mannerisms. But there were marked differences, too.

Jack's dark hair and eyes suggested he had some Native American blood, while Nick and Gabe showed no evidence of that. Gabe was the fairer of the two. He'd probably been a towhead once. Nick's green eyes made him look as if he belonged in Ireland. Interesting.

"Ben outdid himself on the saddle for Mom," Jack said. "But I hope she doesn't happen to glance out the window when you two yahoos head down to the tractor barn together."

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