

**“What time will I see you tomorrow?”**

His gaze zeroed in on her mouth, his own suddenly dry as dust.

“I’ll pick you up at seven.” Xander was already questioning the wisdom of the bargain he’d made with her.

If Frankie was affecting him this much now, what would it be like tomorrow night when they had a whole evening together? Already, the memory of the feel of her made his hands itch to touch her again.

He hadn’t thought this through well at all.

She nodded, her dark braid sliding down her shoulder. “And just so I’m clear, will we be off the clock tomorrow, too?”

Was she flirting with him? Or was he reading too much into it because he wanted her?

\* \* \*

*Rancher in Her Bed* is part of the  
Texas Cattleman’s Club: Houston series.

Dear Reader,

One of my favorite things about books is the power of a story to totally transport me. Usually I experience this when I am a reader, losing myself in the world another author created. But *Rancher in Her Bed* really allowed me to take a journey while I was writing to the new Texas Cattleman's Club in Houston, where two rival families are so real they tell their own stories!

My hero, Xander Currin, is a member of one of those prominent families. From his wealthy ranch to the galas he attends, he's experienced a world of privilege. Cowgirl Frankie Walsh, on the other hand, loves small-town rodeo nights, open-air barbecues and sawdust-covered dance floors. When sparks flew between these two, I got to step into both of those worlds. I hope *Rancher in Her Bed* takes you on a journey, too.

Welcome to Houston, my friends! I hope you enjoy your stay.

Happy reading,

*Joanne Rock*

**JOANNE ROCK**



**RANCHER IN HER BED**

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Special thanks and acknowledgment are given to Joanne Rock for her contribution to the Texas Cattleman’s Club: Houston miniseries.



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Rancher in Her Bed

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**Joanne Rock** credits her decision to write romance to when a book she picked up during a flight delay engrossed her so thoroughly that she didn't mind at all when her flight was delayed two more times. Giving her readers the chance to escape into another world has motivated her to write over eighty books for a variety of Harlequin series.

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##### ***Texas Cattleman's Club: Houston***

*Rancher in Her Bed*

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# One

Frankie Walsh understood that her generation had killed romance.

Sure, some people said that dating apps were responsible. And it was true the swipe-left mentality definitely smothered every last hope of spontaneity and excitement. But whether the blame rested with millennials or apps or the parenting that had let a crop of kids grow up thinking they were the center of the universe, Frankie agreed with the consensus among her girlfriends that romance was a thing of the past.

Which begged the question, why was she lingering outside the main house at Currin Ranch, heart

fluttering wildly while she hoped for a sighting of her boss, Xander Currin?

Because she was ten kinds of foolish, that's why. She'd already accomplished her errand here—a two-second task of retrieving the keys to the barn where the haying equipment was stored. Xander had kindly left them outside the back entrance on a huge wooden patio table, right where the maintenance manager had told her they'd be. One of the other hands who'd helped with the haying equipment yesterday was out sick today, and he'd accidentally taken the other set.

Frankie had volunteered for the errand so fast the other ranch hands had all looked at her sideways. If she wasn't careful, her ill-advised crush on Xander would become a running joke all over Currin Ranch. She valued this job too much to make her workplace uncomfortable that way, and she'd strived for too long to prove she could hold her own with the physical demands of the job.

With the fear of being laughed at spurring her boots, she jammed the keys into the back pocket of her jeans and turned away from the massive log mansion overlooking a creek bed. She kept to the stone path that wound past the pool house and through a low shrubby hedge, returning to the edge of the lawn where she'd left the energetic young mare, Carmen, she'd ridden over. Her time spent with the animals was the best reward of the



job and a necessary part of the requirements for veterinary school. If she could ever make enough money to pay for it.

Yet another reason why this job was so crucial for her. Her other gigs were of the volunteer variety—shadowing a local vet on his calls during her off days and helping out at a local animal shelter. Cur-rin Ranch was the only job she had that came with a paycheck.

Stroking the mare's flank, she was just about to mount up when she heard laughter and voices in the backyard. Male. And female.

A warning prickled along the back of her neck, urging her to go. Or maybe calling her to stay? Because she recognized the deep tone of the man, a warm and sexy chuckle pitched low in a way that made Frankie's skin heat. The object of her silly crush.

But a fluffy feminine giggle smothered any wayward thoughts Frankie might have been entertaining about Xander. Frozen in place, she watched as the couple emerged from the shrubbery together. Xander escorted a strawberry blonde in a bright yellow sundress that accentuated considerable curves. The woman's glossy waves bounced along with everything else as she tapped her way down the path in kitten heels. Reaching the driveway less than ten yards from where Frankie stood, the woman didn't so much as glance her way as she

lifted a hand to wave goodbye to Xander. She slid into an ice-blue convertible that looked like it cost more than veterinary school.

Had she been an overnight guest?

Jealousy flared. Feeling every inch the ranch hand she was, Frankie fought an urge to at least swipe a dusty streak off the front of her jeans. Instead, she hauled herself up on the mare's back even as the horse startled sideways away from the convertible's racing engine.

It was all Frankie could do not to glare at the woman for punching the accelerator while the vehicle was still in Park. Blondie squealed the tires on her way out.

Soothing the mare with a reassuring hold on the reins and a squeeze against her flanks, Frankie was about to turn tail and ride for the barn when she noticed Xander charging her way. Tall and muscular, he wore his jeans and fitted tee with the ease of any other ranch foreman, but as the heir to the Currin family fortune, there was something commanding about his presence. Right now, with his blue eyes fixed on the horse and his stubble-shadowed dark jaw flexing, he had an air of restrained danger. The allure of a man who could hold his own with a surly beast without breaking a sweat.

"Whoa. Easy, Carmen," he called to the anxious palomino, his stance the same one the ranch trainer

used when breaking a new mount, positioned just outside the reach of her dancing forefeet. "Easy."

"She's okay," Frankie assured him, leaning back slightly in the saddle to cue the mare. "I've got her."

Her heart sped faster, more from her boss's sudden appearance at her side than the mild scare with Carmen. Frankie wouldn't have taken her if she'd felt the least bit uneasy with the spirited youngster. Besides, keeping her seat on Carmen was a cakewalk compared to bronc riding, the rodeo event Frankie had recently taken up. She'd tried it on a dare from one of the other ranch hands and discovered she wasn't too bad at it. And considering how badly she could use the extra money, she couldn't deny the appeal of the cash prizes.

Xander peered up at her with narrowed eyes.

"I didn't think the trainer had cleared this one for work." Shifting closer, his gaze darted from the horse to her and back again. "Carmen hasn't been with us long."

Her boss reached to stroke the palomino's muzzle, his dark hair a stark contrast to the horse's golden coat and white mane. She was used to seeing him in his black Stetson around the ranch in his work as the foreman.

Much to his father's frustration.

Everyone involved with Currin Ranch knew that Ryder Currin wanted his only son in the family's oil business and not overseeing the ranching operation.

But for the eleven months that Frankie had been on staff, Xander had been personally involved with everything from the herd to the haying, making sure the collective efforts ran smoothly. He was good at his job, but even she knew the foreman's role wasn't where the heir apparent belonged.

"I'm not using her for work today," she explained, forcing herself to relax, if only for Carmen's sake. She hadn't meant to rile the boss. "I rode her over to pick up the barn key because she seemed restless. I thought she could use an outing."

Why couldn't Xander's blue eyes be focused on her for positive reasons and not because he thought she'd screwed up? So many times, she'd hoped to snag his attention, and now, when she'd finally accomplished it, he seemed on edge. Irritated, even.

"Not cleared for work means no riding." His jaw flexed as he moved closer, stroking down Carmen's neck to her shoulder, quieting the animal. By now, his shoulder neared Frankie's calf, his body in tantalizing proximity. "A good ranch horse doesn't spook at engine noises. No sense putting her in a position to fail when she isn't ready yet."

Frankie bit down on the inside of her lip to keep from pointing out that an over-revved Italian luxury car wasn't the kind of "engine noise" horses heard in the normal course of ranch work. Neither was screechy bubblegum pop dialed up to full blast on

a convertible stereo as his guest peeled out of the driveway.

Then again, she didn't think she could muster an impartial "yes sir" when he was dead wrong about Carmen. Carefully, she quit gnawing on the inside of her lip so she could speak.

"Then I guess I'd better get her back to the barn." Frankie managed a tight smile. "I'll let the trainer know Carmen needs to broaden her musical tolerance."

Xander's head snapped up to look at her, his dark brows angling down with his frown.

Had that slipped out?

Her fake smile froze in place.

In the silent moment that followed, she became aware of the soft buzz of electric hedge trimmers as a gardener worked nearby. The scent of cut grass hung in the Texas June air, growing more sweltering with each breath.

"What's your name again?" he asked, a warning note in his voice.

Was he going to write her up? He couldn't fire her for being a smart-ass, could he? She really needed this job and the hundred hours of animal care that would help her get an interview for vet school. She might have been on staff for almost a year, but she'd only just started working more directly with the horses.

For the first six months she'd done only the worst

of the grunt work, no doubt why the boss hadn't recalled her name.

"Frankie Walsh," she said quickly, kicking herself for spouting off and tugging her hat just a little lower on her forehead. Wishing she could hide. "Thanks for the key."

He gave her a nod but didn't step back, a barrier of impressive muscle and denim. "The rules are in place for a reason. Not just to keep Carmen safe, but the ranch staff, as well."

That caught her off guard.

"Meaning me?" She shook her head, her ponytail swiping across her back as she thought about all the times she'd landed on her butt in local rodeo competitions. Bronc riding wasn't for the faint of heart. "No need to worry about my safety. I'm tougher than I look."

Turning to go, she hoped Xander would forget about the embarrassing encounter.

Her ego was the only thing bruised, after all. His safety concerns were misplaced. Clearly, he favored a softer kind of woman than Frankie would ever be, which was just as well since she should be concentrating on earning enough money to live her dreams instead of mooning over her off-limits boss. There was an open rodeo at a local county fair next weekend, and she needed to be focused if she was going to enter the saddle bronc competition, a sport attracting more women in recent years. She could

ride better than most of the other hands at Currin Ranch, and it wasn't like the small rodeo would attract many female competitors.

She hoped.

She had an outside chance of walking away with the prize—enough money to buy herself a coveted ticket to the Texas Cattleman's Club Flood Relief Gala. The swanky event would be a great place to see the other side of the ranching world and meet the wealthy ranch owners she hoped to one day serve with her veterinary practice.

Better to scuttle back to the barns and forget about Xander. Romance was dead anyhow, right?

Even so, she could almost feel the foreman's gaze following her as she rode away. And she'd be lying if she said it didn't give her a Texas-sized thrill.

A battle of the bands was in full progress when Xander parked his truck outside the fairgrounds for a Friday night rodeo. Because Currin Ranch was a major sponsor of the event, he'd been allowed to park right near the barbecue cook-off pavilion where he was meeting his father for their weekly dinner together.

Normally, dinner with Ryder Currin was a long, drawn-out affair since his father appreciated five-star dining, an attentive waitstaff and the best vintages a wine cellar had to offer. But since Xander would take barbecue from a Texas grill master over

a four-course meal any day of the week, tonight's supper promised to be a whole lot more fun.

Besides, a shorter dinner meant less time for his dad to quiz him about when he was going to return to the front office of the family's oil business.

Dropping his Stetson on his head, he stepped out of the pickup and into the hubbub of a rodeo night. Boots crunching on dry gravel, he walked through the VIP gate as the growing crowd broke into enthusiastic applause for the country band sweating under the gazebo's canopy of decorative lights. The sawdust-covered dance floor was almost full even though it was early. The rodeo wouldn't start for another hour, and the carnival rides were in full swing despite the heat. The scent of slow-roasted brisket hung heavy in the air, grills smoking around the perimeter of the pavilion where chefs from all over the state prepped their best ribs and pulled pork.

"Xander," a familiar deep voice called from inside the covered dining area. "Over here."

Spotting his dad, he edged past a family maneuvering a stroller through the crowd, then joined Ryder at one of the few private tables in the reserved section up front.

His father never wore a suit but somehow, even in jeans and a button-down shirt, he still carried himself with considerable authority. With his boots and his dark brown Stetson, Ryder wore much the



same outfit as the rest of the rodeo-goers, yet looked like a man in charge.

“Hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of ordering a little of everything.” Ryder leaned back in his chair as a curvy redhead in a fringed shirt and denim miniskirt delivered a tray full of barbecue steaming from at least ten different plates. Two beer bottles reigned over the center of the tray.

While the server set out a basket of biscuits, the beers and food, Xander steeled himself for the weekly interrogation about his life, his career plans and how soon he’d be ready to give up his “wild hair” of working the land. The dinners were Ryder’s thinly veiled way of delivering regular guilt trips about not fulfilling his family obligations.

Xander might still live in a private wing of his father’s home, but they rarely saw each other around the ranch. Ryder Currin kept his personal affairs closely guarded. Rumors had been flying around the Texas Cattleman’s Club recently that Ryder was seeing Angela Perry, the daughter of his bitter business rival, Sterling. But Xander wasn’t about to ask his dad about that.

“I happen to know she’s single,” Ryder observed as the server walked away from their table. He tipped his head in the departing woman’s direction. “In case you’re interested.”

Xander’s thoughts were so far from women it took him a moment to realize what his dad was

talking about. Strangely, the only female who'd been circling his thoughts lately was a fierce brunette named Frankie, of all people.

The willowy ranch hand with the big green eyes and dust-smearred jeans wasn't Xander's type, but something about her prickly attitude and challenging stare had gotten under his skin.

"Definitely not interested," he told his father honestly, taking his hat off and settling it on the empty chair beside him. "And I'm pretty sure I passed the stage where I needed your help closing the deal with a woman at least a decade ago."

He plucked one of the longnecks from the center of the table and took a sip.

Ryder chuckled. "I suppose that's fair. Are you still dating Kenzie then?" he pressed, lifting his own beer for a swig. "I thought I saw her car parked outside the house last week."

A loudspeaker announcement called the contestants for the mutton-busting event into the arena, and a handful of families with kids hurried out of the dining pavilion. The band kept playing, their amps only muted periodically for the PA system. Behind them, the big Ferris wheel turned slowly, the neon lights flashing on the spokes even though it wasn't dark out yet.

"No. She only dropped in that morning to ask me to judge the rodeo queen competition with her." Xander had escorted her back to her car as fast as

possible, knowing she'd only inquired about the rodeo queen pageant as an excuse to stop by. To see why he hadn't called. "But I'm not ready for a relationship with her or anyone else. Not after—"

The stab of pain over losing his fiancée in a tragic horse fall had eased in the last two years, but he felt as certain as ever that he wouldn't tread down that path to love and happily-ever-after again. That relationship had been complicated, with unhappy layers he hadn't ever understood. And in the end, it had gutted him. So working the land had been the only thing that offered any healing, and Xander wasn't willing to give that up anytime soon.

"I understand." Leaning forward in his chair, Ryder turned serious. "Better than you think. When I lost Elinah—" His lips compressed into a flat line at the mention of his second wife, who'd died of cancer thirteen years ago. "I know it's not easy to love again after losing someone."

Xander had only been twelve at the time, and he hadn't been living with his father then, spending most of his time with his mother, Penny, Ryder's first wife. But even as a kid, Xander had seen how his father retreated into himself for years afterward. Elinah had been the love of his life.

Now he appreciated his father's understanding.

"To be honest, I've got zero interest in the whole idea of love." Drawing one of the plates of ribs closer, he took a big bite.

“No need to rule it out altogether,” his father cautioned, ignoring his vibrating phone next to him on the table. “Maybe you’ll meet someone at the Texas Cattleman’s Club Flood Relief Gala tomorrow night.” He gave Xander a level stare. “You *are* attending, I trust?”

Ryder had already insisted on it, since he was hosting the event himself. Xander had no desire to spend the evening at a black-tie shindig, but he planned to support his father in his ongoing war with Sterling Perry for control of the Houston branch of the Texas Cattleman’s Club.

While Sterling might be a wealthy businessman with a vast company that dealt in real estate, construction and property management, Xander didn’t trust the guy. Part of that was because Sterling hated and resented Xander’s father, of course. But Xander found it tough to respect a ranch owner who never spent any time on the land, and that was Sterling to a T. He might own the prosperous Perry Ranch, but that didn’t mean its success had anything to do with his ranching IQ.

“I’m going stag.” Xander had a spare ticket, but his awkward meeting with Kenzie had reinforced his decision to engage in only the most superficial kinds of affairs. She’d clearly been upset with him when she’d squealed her tires on her way out of the driveway.

If Frankie Walsh hadn’t been such an accom-

plished horsewoman, Kenzie's childish act could have seriously endangered the ranch hand. Frankie had really handled herself well, especially on an excitable young mare.

"There will be plenty of single women there, anyway." His father wiped his hands on a paper napkin as their server appeared to clear a few of the plates. He waited until she retreated to finish his thought. "Just keep an open mind where romance is concerned."

*Not going to happen, Dad.* But as soon as he thought that, Frankie's long legs and sexy smile smoked through his thoughts. He willed away her image and took another swig of his beer. The sound of cowbells and cheering erupted from the nearby arena, and he guessed the children's rodeo event had started, a precursor to the adult competitions that would start soon.

"Most of the women I meet are more interested in the Currin name. Or the fortune. Or—" he'd been about to say *my sexual prowess*, but that hardly seemed like a topic to share "—who knows what. But regardless, I'll be there tomorrow."

Another announcement came over the loud-speaker for the barrel-racing contestants. Show-time must be soon. Xander gladly used it as an excuse to finish his meal.

"I'd better get into the arena." He'd asked his father to meet him here for their weekly meal since

several employees were competing in tonight's events. "I want to wish the guys good luck before things get under way."

And yes, a part of him wondered if he'd see Frankie. She might attend to support the other hands. Or hell, maybe she'd be competing in the barrel race or one of the other women's events. He really didn't know much about her, which was unlike him.

Truth was, he'd avoided her the few times their paths had come close to crossing around Currin Ranch. He'd felt the pull toward her before and had always tamped it down deep, unwilling to get drawn into that kind of affair with someone who worked for him. He only knew she had the least seniority around the ranch up until a few months ago, when they'd brought on a new kid, which meant Frankie often got stuck with some of the worst jobs.

"Sure." Ryder lifted his beer. "If I don't see you inside, I'll definitely catch up with you at the gala, son."

Nodding, Xander scooped up his hat and replaced it on his head before leaving the dining pavilion.

Outside the arena, he could see the flag bearer lining up on horseback with her attendants. A few rodeo clowns waited with them, part of the processional that would kick things off soon. Inside the open arena with its high metal roof and dirt floor,

Xander could see a couple of kids in cowboy hats riding the sheep used for the mutton-busting competition. The crowd was cheering, cowbells rang and the event announcer narrated the action.

He'd been to plenty of rodeos, from the big Houston Livestock Show to the local Friday night events like this one, and he enjoyed the small-town, grassroots competitions far more. While he appreciated the national spotlight that the multibillion-dollar rodeo industry brought to ranching, he had more fun at the community affairs that celebrated the hardworking men and women who made their living off the land.

Ranching was tough, but there was something cathartic about putting in the hard manual labor day after day and seeing the results firsthand.

"Hey, boss!" someone shouted from behind the chutes.

Peering over that way, Xander spotted a throng of soon-to-be competitors congregating, black-and-white numbers pinned to their Western shirts. A bowlegged cowboy was flagging him down, waving the end of his lasso.

Xander recognized Reggie Malloy, a longtime member of the Currin Ranch team. He headed that way, sidestepping a few families retrieving their kids after the mutton-busting event.

"Good to see you, Reggie." He clapped the senior-

most herdsman on the shoulder. “Just came down to wish everyone well before the competitions start.”

They moved out of the way of the stock contractors bringing in the calves for the first round of roping events. Out in the arena, the procession to kick off the rodeo began. Purple spotlights circled the venue, casting streaks across Reggie’s face as they spoke.

“We’re all fired up down here,” Reggie told him with a wide grin, his cheeks red from the heat. He wore a championship buckle that broadcast his experience in roping. “My money’s on the new kid, Wyatt, to do the ranch proud tonight. I’ve been working with him off and on since Christmas, and he’s come a long way.”

“That’s good of you, Reg. The young guys all look up to you.” He lowered his voice as the crowd quieted for the national anthem.

Even the people backstage went still. Only the calves shuffled their feet while a local high school girl dressed in red, white and blue belted out the song. When she finished, the crowd cheered and the announcer started to rev things up.

Reggie tucked his rope under one arm and started to head back toward the other competitors in the first go-round. “Boss, you might want to stick around for the lady bronc riders later.”

“Lady bronc riders?” He’d been to plenty of rodeos before, and it wasn’t often that he’d seen



women competing in rough stock events, especially at the smaller venues like this one.

“There are more and more of them,” Reggie assured him while the rodeo clowns performed a few tricks to warm up the crowd. “There are only a few signed up tonight, but our own Frankie Walsh is one of them. I’ve seen her ride and she’s not bad.”

*Frankie?*

A vision of the ranch hand on the back of a bucking bronc flashed through his mind. Followed by memories of Rena’s fall. He hadn’t been there the day his fiancée had been thrown, but that had never stopped his brain from imagining it thousands of times.

His gut balled up in a cold knot.

“Where is she?” Clammy sweat popped out along his brow. “Where’s Frankie?”

He needed to talk her out of it. No, he needed to lay down the law and tell her she couldn’t compete. What in the hell was she thinking to tempt fate like that? Bronc riding was a dangerous sport for anyone—man or woman.

“You okay?” Reggie’s blond brows knit. Frowning, the wrangler reached for a bottled water resting on an empty bleacher off to one side. “Have a drink. You don’t look so good.”

Swiping a hand along his forehead, he tried to shut off the images flashing through his mind.

“I’m fine. Just—” He was already scouring the

arena for any sign of the saucy brunette with killer legs. “Where’s Frankie?”

Reggie pointed outside the arena. “Last I saw her, she was heading outside to give herself a pep talk. Looked to me like she was walking in the direction of the Ferris wheel.”

Xander’s boots were already in motion.