

# *A Horseman's Heart*

HORSEMEN OF CROSS ROADS FARM ~ BOOK 1



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# Dedication

*For my brother Ralph, horseman and saddle maker  
extraordinaire.*

*For the gentle horses and dedicated volunteers serving at  
therapeutic riding centers everywhere, especially my human  
and equine friends at JoyRide Center Therapeutic  
Horsemanship Program and SIRE, Houston's Therapeutic  
Equestrian Center. I miss all of you so much!*

*And with immense gratitude to God for this native Texan's  
opportunity to enjoy eight years living in beautiful North  
Carolina before bringing us back home to Texas.*

# Chapter One



Saving Gem was by far the most beautiful work he'd ever done.

Giving him up might be the hardest thing he'd ever do.

Kip Lorimer tapped the telephone number displayed on the website he'd come across last week, then lifted his cell phone to his ear.

"Cross Roads Farm." The lilting voice took him by surprise. The woman he'd spoken with a few days ago had sounded a little more mature.

"Uh, Mrs. Cross?"

"She isn't available just now."

No reason Kip should suddenly feel so off balance, but he did. Probably a bad case of nerves after that near-miss at the supermarket last week. He pulled his thoughts together. "Just tell her I'll be headed that way tomorrow with the horse I talked to her about. I should get there sometime late Tuesday."

"Okay." Something ripped, like paper tearing off a notepad. "Tuesday, you said?"

“North Carolina’s a long drive from Texas.”

Silence. “You’re bringing us a horse all the way from Texas?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Sorry, it’s just that our horse donations usually come from local people.” The woman gave a soft laugh. “Do you need directions?”

“Got it covered.”

“And your name and number, please?”

“Lorimer. Kip Lorimer.” Kip pressed his lips together. This wasn’t the time to explain that by noon tomorrow, he planned to trash this phone and buy a new one. With a new number. “Tell you what. I’ll call again as I get closer.”

“Okay, I’ll give my mother the message. Have a safe trip.”

“Thanks, ma’am.” Kip ended the call with those gentle words echoing through his brain: *Have a safe trip.*

And he hadn’t even gotten her name.

*Forget it, man.* He didn’t need any woman—even one with a voice as airy as spun sugar—getting under his skin. Now or ever.

He finished packing his saddle-making tools and locked them in the trunk behind his pickup cab. After stowing the rest of his meager belongings in the front section of his two-horse trailer, he checked on Gem in the corral before grabbing what shut-eye he could on this muggy June night.

Morning came all too soon. “Into the trailer, boy. Time to head out.” He laid the lead rope across the flyspecked gray’s withers and patted the muscled rump. The horse nickered and stepped easily into the trailer.

Moving around to the window, Kip reached through the opening and clipped the trailer tie to Gem’s halter. Before he could unsnap the lead rope and pull it through,

Gem was already attacking the hay net like the poor horse hadn't eaten in weeks.

Three years or thirty, abandonment was a hard thing to forget.

Kip rubbed Gem's ear with affection and then climbed in behind the wheel of his battered white pickup. With one last look at the rented doublewide he'd called home since settling here almost four years ago, he steered the pickup down the graveled lane. One more stop before hitting the highway.

About seven miles down the two-lane farm road, Kip pulled up to the T Bar J Ranch security gate and pressed the intercom button. Seconds later, Tom Jacobs's husky voice greeted him. "Howdy, Kip! Come on through. I'll meet you at the barn."

The black iron gates swung open, and Kip drove through, slowing to admire Tom's herd of sleek quarter horses and thoroughbreds. Tom Jacobs waved Kip to a halt in front of the massive gray-and-white barn. Stepping out of the pickup, Kip accepted the big man's firm handshake.

"So you're really doing this, huh?" Tom hooked his thumbs into his front jeans pockets. "You'll sure be missed around these parts."

Kip tucked in his chin. In one lithe movement, he hoisted himself up and over the wheel well. Folding back a canvas cover, he revealed the custom reining saddle he'd been working on for the past two months.

A long, low whistle sliced the morning air. Tom leaned in to run an admiring hand along the wild rose tooling on the skirt and stirrup leather. "That is as fine a piece of saddle-making as I've ever seen."

With a nod of thanks, Kip hefted the saddle and passed it down to Tom, then hopped to the ground and followed

the man into the immaculate tack room. Familiar smells of horse and leather filled Kip's nostrils, smells he'd grown up with, smells he cherished. He breathed in slowly and tried to imagine owning his own ranch someday. Raising a fine herd of horses. Maybe even getting married and starting a family.

Scratch the last part. Horses, you could trust. Women? Not so much.

With an almost reverential sigh, Tom Jacobs set the saddle on a rack in the center of the room. "Montana's gonna look mighty spiffy in this get-up. What do I owe you, son?"

Kip pulled a wrinkled invoice from his shirt pocket and silently handed it to Tom. He'd need every cent of his profits to cover this trip to North Carolina, then find somewhere new to settle for a while. It was time to clear out of Texas once and for all.

Tom scanned the bill with a smirk. "How many times have I told you? You're way undercharging for work this fine. Let's go to my office and I'll write you a check."

Kip welcomed the coolness of the air-conditioned room. He dropped onto the edge of a maroon leather chair. "I appreciate all the business you've given me, the customers you've sent my way."

"My pleasure." Tom ripped the check from his checkbook and passed it across the desk. "Added on a little bonus. You earned it."

Kip's throat closed. A thousand dollars more than the price he'd quoted. "This is too much—"

"No arguments." Tom leaned back, his chair rocking gently. "You got a long, hard haul ahead. You'll need some seed money once you get where you're going."

"But—"

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“Just say thank you and get on outta here. Maybe you can make Birmingham by suppertime.” Tom stood and strode to the door.

Kip folded the check in half and tucked it into his shirt pocket. Tom Jacobs was a good man, a man of integrity. A man who knew how to treat both animals and people like they deserved a measure of respect.

A man who made Kip miss his dad more than ever.

Lips pressed together, he pushed up from the chair and offered his hand. “Thanks. More than I can say.”

