

Pride's Deception

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Chapter One

Robin Beck looked around her kitchen. She loved to cook but was seldom able to cook real meals anymore. Managing the store seemed to take up almost all of her time. Even when the store was closed, she sometimes had to go back over there in the evenings. She did some of the things she couldn't do very well when the store was open, such as inventory, stocking or the books. The books! That one was the most tedious of all. She hated doing the books. And to think that she'd almost majored in accounting at ASU.

As she started to rise from the table, she stopped and looked closely at her dad. Of course, even though he was taking a sip of coffee, he noticed and gave her a puzzled look in return. He'd been giving her quite a few of those looks lately. What was going on? Was it just her imagination or was he seeing something in her behavior?

Well, if she was honest, she had to admit that she'd been a little moody lately and figured that he'd probably picked up on that. But she just couldn't help it. Last Tuesday had been three years since she'd been given word that her fiancé, Jeff, had been killed in Iraq. How else was she supposed to act?

"Robin?"

She hadn't realized she'd been staring but her ever-watchful dad had caught her.

She reached out a hand and covered his on the table.

"I'm all right Dad." She snickered. "At least I will be now."

He turned his hand over and grasped her hand in his. "I know you will Kiddo. But, it's been three years. You've got to get on with your life. You're only twenty-five and you still have a lot of your life ahead of you. You need to climb out of the past and start living again."

Robin braced herself for what she knew was coming next.

"I know you loved Jeff, but you need to find another young man that you can spend your life with." He grinned. "And I know of one boy around here who would be more than willing to be just that man."

"Dad. You know that Kirby and I have just been friends for so long that I could never look at him in any other way."

Her dad stood and she knew that it was so he could really look down on her as he tried to make his point.

He snorted and waved a hand in the air between them. "You know good and well that boy doesn't think of you as just a friend. Why, he'd been head over heels in love with you since you two were kids."

Again, even though she wasn't going to admit it to her dad, she'd known that too. But, she had always genuinely liked Kirby and just had fun being around him. But that was all. If she had to put her thoughts into words, she'd probably have to say that he was just like a brother to her. That certainly didn't mean she'd ever want to marry him.

She tried to explain all that to her dad again but he wasn't going to listen to her denials.

"I know, but Robin, Honey, if you ever just stopped and took a really good look at the poor boy, you just might see a whole lot of things you've been missing all these years."

She knew it was unfair of her but she said, "Well, what about you, Dad? Mom's been gone two years now. Don't you think it's about time you did what you're telling me to do? You know she told both of us that she wanted you to find someone you could be happy with. She didn't want you to be alone either."

Tears came to her eyes as she thought about how much had happened to her and her dad over the past three years. Certainly, the most devastating for her dad had been the death of her mother. That had hurt Robin a lot and it still did but she knew it had to hurt her dad so much more. There wasn't much to compare to losing someone you'd loved and had been married to for twenty-five years.

No, she couldn't quite relate to that. But it had been almost as bad for her to lose her fiancé the way she had, only months before the wedding. But she had just recently decided that it was time for her to move on with the rest of her life.

Robin started to get up again but this time to grab a tissue, when one appeared in front of her face. She tried to smile up at her dad as she wiped her eyes.

"Okay Dad! I'll make a deal with you."

She stood then so she could be closer to him and to be able to look into his eyes even though he was five inches taller than her.

He didn't say anything but she knew she had his attention now as he stood there with his arms crossed on his chest. She reached out and touched his cheek.

"I will if you will!"

His expression didn't change for a long moment then she knew exactly when he caught the full meaning what she'd just said. His eyes narrowed and he actually blushed. Her dad, the big gruff mechanic, actually blushed.

Suddenly something hit her. "Hey wait a minute Dad. All of a sudden, I have a sneaky feeling that I've just been out-manuevered here. I think that not only have you picked out Kirby Thornton for me but you have someone in mind for yourself too."

He turned his head away from her and started for the door. But she caught the grin on his face as he went. She thought about confronting him further but decided that if she was right, she'd see things if she just started paying a little more attention to what went on next door at the garage.

So, with that in mind, she watched him go out the door for a few seconds then followed him out. She needed to get on over to the store and get it ready to open.

* * *

Kirby Thornton was tired but it was a good tired. Sure, he knew his big sister and brother both thought he was just a bit on the lazy side and maybe that had been a little true in the past. But not anymore.

Both he and his older brother, Blake, had started building their own houses there on the ranch several years ago. They had decided that since Reggie was the oldest and since she was the only girl, then she should have the old ranch house, which was still in tiptop shape.

They'd worked on their houses as much as they could but with all the time they had to spend just keeping the ranch going and running a hunting guide service on the side, neither one had been able to work as much as they'd wanted to on their houses.

He had to admit though that there had been many times that he could have been working on his house when he'd chosen to go out drinking with his buddies. Of course, always responsible Blake had always been working on his own house.

Kirby snorted. But, if it hadn't been for that, then Blake's house wouldn't be ready for a family now the way it was. Sure, in the last three weeks, they'd all worked an awful lot finishing off the inside of Blake's house. But it was ready now and his wasn't.

He smiled when he remembered that his shoulder had kept him from having to do much of the work. His right arm was still in a sling from being shot in the shoulder three weeks ago. Sure, he could do a few things with his right hand but not all that much.

But what none of them knew was that he'd been secretly working on finishing the inside of his house too. They'd finished Blake's house more than a week ago. Now, for quite a few of the nights since, four of his buddies had been over at his house helping him finish it.

Why? Because he was envious of his brother who was marrying a wonderful woman who already had two of the cutest little four-year-old daughters Kirby had ever been around. It made him want the same and he'd decided that he was finally going to get it too.

Sure, Robin Beck had always turned him away. In fact, she'd never wanted to be more than just friends with him, which frustrated him to no end. He wasn't about to give up now. He just had a feeling that all of that was about to change ... one way or the other.

And he knew exactly when it was all going to start happening too. Next week, four of Robin's cousins were going on a bear hunt and they'd talked Robin into going along but only as an observer. Wow! He was going to be camping up in the mountains with Robin for a whole week, maybe longer. He could hardly wait.

All through his musings, he'd been walking from his house over to the big house where Reggie lived and of course, Dixie and her daughters were staying there, but only until the wedding Saturday.

Mealtime around the Thornton ranch had certainly become an event since those two little girls had moved in last month when Dixie's ex-husband had been around causing trouble. Someone had even shot at her while was driving her car down the highway.

Just as he expected, and even hoped, as soon as he stepped into the kitchen, the twins, who were sitting in their booster seats at the table started calling out to him.

"Uncle Kirby! Uncle Kirby!

He loved it that they now called him uncle. They'd all laughed when the more vocal of the twins, Sara, had explained why they should be able to call him uncle. She'd said that now that Blake was going to be their daddy, then Kirby had to be their uncle and Reggie had to be their aunt too. No one, especially Kirby, had wanted to argue with that logic.

Kirby spent the next few minutes playing some sort of table game with the girls while Reggie and Dixie finished cooking breakfast. He took the time to look at his big sister and his brother's fiancée. Big was right when you talked about his sister. Well, after all, he was six four and Blake was six three, no one should be surprised that Reggie was six foot. Then there was Dixie who was seven inches shorter than Reggie.

Dixie had, at least until last month, managed one of the two local bar and grills for her parents who had retired to Sun City. She had long dark blond hair that she had up in a ponytail today. Reggie of course, had the Thornton red hair. Well, to be fair, her hair was a true dark red while his and Blake's was more of a brown that seemed red sometimes. It was as if their hair didn't know whether it wanted to be brown or red. Of course, they'd both been teased about it when they'd been kids.

Soon, they were all sitting down to a big ranch style breakfast of pancakes, bacon, sausage, eggs and of course biscuits.

Reggie looked up from her plate just as Kirby looked her way and he saw a twinkle in her eye before she spoke.

He mentally prepared himself for whatever embarrassing comment his big sister was about to throw at him.

“Robin called last night and said that her dad brought a load up late yesterday and she thinks all the stuff we ordered for the wedding was in it.”

She waited and he knew she was going to make him ask but he wasn’t going to until she actually spelled it out.

She smiled widely and said, “Well, if you don’t want to go down there this morning and get it, I guess I could get Blake to do it.”

He knew she was just razzing him but he wasn’t about to test her. So, he grinned back at her and said, “Sure. I’ll go get it as soon as I finish my morning chores. Okay?”

She laughed and turned to Dixie and began a conversation with her, thus ignoring him. He didn’t get mad. He knew what she was up to and for once, he didn’t really care. She’d been pushing him a lot lately to make his intentions known to Robin but he’d just been biding his time, waiting for just the right situation but it hadn’t come up yet. It would be coming soon. He knew it would.

So, after doing a rush job on his morning chores, Kirby went out to his pickup and jumped in. He started the engine then, as he usually did, he opened the console and checked to make sure his .357 was in there exactly where it should be.

He couldn’t keep a grin off his face as he set out for Bear Creek’s only grocery store.

* * *

As she sometimes did when there weren’t any customers in the store, Robin stepped out the front door, took a deep breath of fresh mountain air, and grinned as she just gazed all around her. She loved the mountains, which made Bear Creek look like it was sitting in the middle of a giant bowl. She stared up at the beautiful, bright blue Arizona sky. Yes, she had to remind herself that she did indeed have much to be thankful for now.

That was so true. She had a nice home with her dad and they had a good income from the store and garage. Most of all, she was home ... home where she belonged. She loved the mountains and she loved Bear Creek, every single thing about it.

She waved at her dad next door, as he talked to a customer over by the gas pumps. Finally, she turned and stepped back into the store. Yes, she particularly loved running their store. She really enjoyed greeting and chatting with her customers, most of whom she’d known all of her life and thus, they were her friends as well.

But just lately, she’d begun to think that something was missing from her life. She knew what it was too. All of the girls she’d grown up with were married. She wasn’t going to go there right now. She didn’t want to spoil her good mood.

She spent the next hour bringing boxes of goods out of the storeroom to stock the shelves out front. Since they didn't sell fresh butcher shop types of meat, there was only one small freezer that held frozen meat. Most of what they sold was prepackaged meat such as bacon, sausage, and lunchmeat. The big walk-in cooler had the drinks, dairy products and packaged meat in it. Everything else went on the various shelves on the aisles around the store.

But, since it was Thursday and her dad had brought up their weekly order last night, she had a lot of putting away to do.

She'd just returned from the storeroom with a case of green beans in her arms when a beat-up old pickup pulled into the small parking lot out front. She noticed right away that there were two big, rough looking men getting out of the truck.

She quickly made her way up to the front and around behind the counter that ran perpendicular to the wall near the front door. She knew from experience that she would probably need the counter between her and those guys.

As soon as the men began coming through the door, she noticed that they both had pistols in holsters on their belts. Well, that in itself wasn't usually cause for alarm in Bear Creek. Most of the men and quite a few of the women, like Reggie Thornton, wore guns wherever they went, almost anywhere around the valley.

What concerned her though was the looks each of them were giving her as they went in different directions around the store. She felt under the counter for her .38, just for reassurance. It was there but she knew better than to think she would be able to fight off both of them if it came to that.

One of the men, the bigger one who was as wide as an oak tree, came up to the front with several packages of lunchmeat and a six-pack. Then, suddenly, the other man was shoulder to shoulder with him and he was tossing items on the counter too.

Robin kept her eyes on the bigger one who was still standing directly in front of her. He smiled but it looked more like a snarl.

"I don't think you want to try to make us pay for this stuff. So why don't you just go ahead and throw it all in a bag and we'll be out of here. That way there won't be any trouble."

He grinned this time and she didn't mistake it for a friendly one. That was when she noticed that they both had their hands resting on the handles of the pistols on their hips.

She reached for a plastic bag and began placing the food in it. What else could she do? She couldn't try to get her gun and then try to outshoot them, that was for sure.

Just then, the door opened to her right and the men looked that way. It gave her enough time to grab her .38. But, she quickly realized that she might not be needing it this time.

Kirby Thornton came through the door and she could see his .357 Magnum in his right hand, which was partially hidden by the sling his arm was in. Robin had never been happier to see anyone in her life.

The big man in front of Robin started to pull his pistol out and Kirby raised his gun and pointed it directly at the man's chest.

"I wouldn't be doing that if I were you."

When the big man took his hand off his weapon, Kirby motioned with his left hand to the men and they both moved their hands away from their guns.

"Now, I think you boys ought to pay the lady and then get the hell out of Bear Creek. And if I see you again, the sheriff's deputy will be having a less than friendly chat with you."

The big man turned back toward Robin then and grunted when he saw the .38 in her hand, pointing at his chest.

She quickly laid the gun down behind the counter and dumped the items she'd already placed in the bag, back on the counter. Then she began ringing them all up on her register. When she finished bagging them, the big guy tossed two twenty-dollar bills on the counter. She opened the cash register to give the man his change but Kirby spoke up first.

"I'd say the lady deserves the difference as a tip for the trouble you boys caused her today."

Without a sound, the big man in front of her grabbed the bag of groceries and headed out the door with the other one right behind him. Kirby stepped aside and watched them until the truck pulled out of the parking lot and headed north on the state highway.

Only then did Kirby take his gun out of his right hand with his left hand. He walked up to the counter across from her, placed his gun there, and tried to smile down at her.

"Are you all right Robin? They didn't do anything before I came in, did they?"

She shook her head, still unable to force words to come out of her mouth. Finally, she shook her head again, this time to clear it.

"I sure am glad you came in when you did Kirby. But how did you know they were going to pull something?"

At first, she didn't think he was going to answer her. He just stared into her eyes for a long moment. Then, a mischievous smile broke out across his face and he motioned toward the parking lot.

"Robin, don't you know that every time I pull into that parking lot, even before I turn off the truck engine, I'm looking in here to see if I can get a glimpse of you before you see me and you put on your business face."

She started to deny what he was saying but this was Kirby. She'd grown up with him. Even though he was almost a year older, because of how their birthdays had fallen, they'd

been in the same grade all the way through school there in Bear Creek. He just plain knew her too well. And if she would be honest with herself, she knew that was part of the problem she'd always had with him.

She hoped that he wouldn't force her to answer and was relieved when he said, "Well, anyway, I was looking in as I pulled into the parking lot and I could see those skunks clearly through the glass in the doors. It didn't take much imagination for me to figure out they were giving you trouble. So, I just tucked my .357 in my sling, just in case."

"Well, thanks Kirby. I really do appreciate it." Then she thought of something. "But shouldn't you let Chip know about them?"

He snorted then and motioned for her to come around the counter to where he was. When she got there, he opened the door and stepped through far enough for her to lean out and see that Chip's patrol vehicle, which was a 4x4 pickup, was on the side of the road about a hundred yards down the road. She looked past Chip's flashing lights and saw that he had both of the men who'd just caused her trouble, standing next to their truck.

She breathed a sigh of relief as they went back inside the store.

"Will he arrest them?"

Kirby shook his head. Nah. He'll probably cuss them out real good then escort them out of town with a warning not to come back."

"That's good."

Now what? She had been uncomfortable around Kirby ever since she'd come back to the valley three years ago. So, she just stood there trying to avoid looking into his eyes which she knew were on her.

He was really tall. In fact, all three of the Thorntons were tall. But Kirby, the youngest, was the tallest. Even Reggie, his sister, was tall. But she knew that it wasn't Kirby's size that had always bothered her about him. It was the fact that he'd always been right there, almost in her face all the time.