

THE CHRISTMAS COWBOY

by

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The Christmas Cowboy

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by Shanna Hatfield

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*To those who never
give up on their dreams...*

Chapter One

“This seat taken?”

Startled by the deep voice speaking close to her ear, Kenzie Beckett looked up into eyes the color of sapphires and momentarily lost the ability to speak.

Shaking her head, she moved her oversized shoulder bag from the chair in question to a space near her feet. Sitting up straighter as a man stood looking down at her, she fought the urge to lick her suddenly dry lips. She’d noticed the handsome cowboy at the airport many times, but never had the opportunity to be this close to him.

He smelled every bit as good as he looked.

“Mind if I sit down?” he asked, pointing to the empty chair beside her.

Taking a deep breath, she smiled and stuck out her hand as the cowboy folded himself into the seat, filling the space next to her with an appealing scent that made her think of leather, spices, and rugged masculinity.

“I’m Kenzie,” she said, pleased when he took her hand and gave it a firm, yet gentle shake, causing an unsettling storm of electrical currents to rush up her arm.

“Tate,” he said, flashing a white-toothed grin, displaying two dimples through the scruffy stubble on his face. “Tate Morgan.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Morgan,” Kenzie said, smiling in return. Tongue-tied and awestruck, she couldn’t believe she was sitting next to Tate Morgan, rodeo star.

Although ranching and rodeos were no longer part of her life, she kept up with some of the details. The good-looking cowboy sitting next to her was one of the top saddle bronc riders in the world. She knew he was from Washington State, but never connected him to the Tri-Cities area where she lived. She absently wondered if he was from Kennewick, Richland, or Pasco.

He must frequent the Pasco airport as often as she did with his rodeo travels. That was probably why she’d seen him there before and why he was waiting in the seat next to her to board the flight to Denver.

“Where are you traveling today?”

“Tennessee,” Tate replied, grateful he was late getting to the airport. The only seat left in the waiting area was the one next to the dark-haired beauty who caught his eye the last several times he flew out of town. “Call me Tate. All my friends do and I certainly hope we’ll be friends.”

Kenzie narrowed her gaze. She should have known he’d start flirting within seconds of sitting down. Give a man a pair of boots, a Stetson, and a pair of perfect-fitting Wranglers, and he’d take it as free license to flirt with any female crossing his path.

“I don’t make it a habit of becoming friends with people I randomly meet at the airport,” Kenzie said, tearing her gaze away from Tate’s gorgeous blue eyes. Closing the fashion magazine she’d been mindlessly reading before he startled her, she stuffed it in her bag and checked her watch again.

“Really?” Tate asked, tipping back his Stetson and revealing a hint of light brown hair. “I figure once names are exchanged and handshakes are given, you’re a friend until proven otherwise.”

“Oh,” Kenzie said, heat filling her cheeks at his words. He spoke in a friendly tone with a smile, but she recognized a rebuke when she heard one.

What was it about this man that threw her off her game?

A corporate trainer for one of the most successful direct sales companies in the country, she could get a room filled with consultants on their feet and enthusiastically following her direction

with no problem. She could take on the corporate team, pitch ideas, and win them over to her way of thinking with hardly a blink.

But put her next to a cowboy, especially one as attractive as Tate, and she lost the ability to function with any degree of logic or wisdom.

A voice over the loudspeaker interrupted her thoughts, announcing another fifteen-minute delay for the Denver flight.

Releasing a pent-up sigh, Kenzie opened a zippered pocket on her bag and pulled out her phone. She sent a text message to the organizer of the regional meeting in Denver she planned to lead later that morning, letting the woman know she would probably be late.

Normally, Kenzie liked to arrive the day before an event so she didn't run the risk of being late. It also gave her time to prepare to give her best to the consultants. The trainer originally lined up to lead the meeting had an emergency and asked Kenzie to cover for him, so she'd only found out she needed to be in Denver the previous evening.

"Everything okay?" Tate asked, drumming his fingers on the arm of the seat. Despite his calm facade, he had a tight connecting flight and if they didn't get moving, he was going to miss his plane.

"It will be if we can board and be on our way soon," Kenzie said, tugging on the navy skirt of her business suit. Although it was only early May, the airport was warm and stuffy, crowded as it was with people waiting for flights. "I'm leading a meeting in Denver and unless we make up some time in the air, a few hundred consultants will be left waiting for me to get there. I don't like to keep people waiting."

"That's good to know," Tate said, grinning again. "What is it you do?"

Kenzie glanced over to see if he was genuinely interested or just killing time. At the inquisitive look in his eyes, she relaxed a little.

"I'm a corporate trainer with Dew," Kenzie said, taking a business card from her bag and handing it to him. "We're a skin-care company that's been around since the 1940s."

Tate accepted the card from Kenzie and stared at the logo of a pale blue dewdrop with the word "Dew" embossed in gold across the center.

"Dew?" Tate asked, thinking it an odd name for a company. "Where's the name come from?"

Kenzie smiled and Tate felt drawn to the light shining in her beautiful brown eyes. They reminded him of the molasses his dad was so fond of eating - dark, rich, and sweet.

"All women want a soft, dewy complexion," Kenzie said, biting her tongue to keep from launching into her usual spiel about the company and their superior products.

"If they hired you to be a walking billboard, you do a great job," Tate said, causing Kenzie to blush again. "So your company is all about stuff women use to preserve their youthful appearance?"

"Basically," Kenzie said, convinced the outrageously handsome cowboy next to her would not understand the importance of moisturizers, lotions, and exfoliators to the health of aging skin.

"So your people go door-to-door peddling goo?" Tate asked with a teasing grin.

"No, they don't go door-to-door or peddle goo." Kenzie couldn't stop the smile lifting the corners of her mouth as she removed a catalog from her bag and handed it to Tate.

He browsed through the glossy pages, noticing the company offered more than just lotions and potions. Dew sold a collection for men, spa items, and gift options in what appeared to be a well thought-out product line.

“How does it work? How do your... what did you call them? Consultants?” At Kenzie’s nod he continued. “How do they get catalogs into the hands of potential customers?” Tate asked. He was unfamiliar with the concept of direct sales and if he found something he didn’t know, he quickly set out to learn all he could on the topic.

“Home parties. People invite friends into their homes and host parties. Consultants give a brief presentation and take orders. The party host receives freebies and discounted product for her trouble and people get together for a fun hour or two while shopping in the comfort of someone’s home,” Kenzie said, warming to the subject.

She put herself through college doing direct sales. Her passion for the industry, Dew in particular, was why she was a well-respected corporate trainer at the age of twenty-seven.

“If I invite a bunch of buddies to my house, set out some snacks and have one of your consultants come show us your stuff, you’d give me freebies?” Tate asked, only halfway joking. If he could somehow coerce Kenzie into being the consultant, he’d host a party every month just to be able to see her.

“In theory, that’s how it works,” Kenzie said, laughing as a visual popped into her head of Tate and his friends sitting around with facials dripping off their stubbly chins. “Of course, the freebies depend on your total orders for the party.”

Before Tate could ask more questions, the call to board rang through the airport. Assuming it was going to take a while, Kenzie started to gather up her belongings to make a final trip to the restroom. Watching what she was doing, Tate put a hand on her arm, drawing her attention.

“You can leave your stuff here. I’ll keep an eye on it,” he said, nodding his head toward the restroom door.

“Well, I...” Kenzie said, surprised by his offer. She didn’t know the man and shouldn’t trust him, even if he did seem nice.

“I promise not to run off with your stuff or touch anything,” Tate said, holding his hand up, like he was prepared to make a pledge. “Scout’s honor. Besides, I’d look ridiculous toting that bright pink bag. It clashes with my shirt.”

Kenzie laughed, noticing just how well his burgundy shirt fit across his broad shoulders and chest.

“Thank you,” she said, getting to her feet. “I’ll be right back.”

“No need to hurry,” Tate said, looking at the long line of people waiting to board.

Returning a few minutes later, she found Tate standing at the back of the line, both his bag and hers over his shoulder, her suit jacket draped over his arm.

“I thought I better get in line since it’s finally starting to move,” Tate said, handing Kenzie her jacket.

“Thank you.” She took her bag from him and slid the strap over her shoulder. Digging in a side pocket, she pulled out her boarding pass and checked to make sure everything was just as she left it. Tate seemed like a good guy, but trusting handsome cowboys had gotten her into trouble before.

“What have you got in that thing? Rocks?” Tate teased as they stepped closer to the door.

“No, bricks.” Kenzie grinned over her shoulder at him as she handed her pass to the ticket agent.

Tate felt an unfamiliar twinge in the region of his heart as Kenzie took her boarding pass and walked out the door. Despite his experience with the opposite sex, he’d never had anyone affect him like the beautiful brunette.

Giving her a quick once-over, he admired the dark hair piled on her head, her long legs, and trim figure. He liked that she was tall. Topping six feet, he generally preferred smaller women, but in her heels, Kenzie was nearly his height.

Walking with her onto the plane and waiting to go down the aisle, a hint of something soft and floral tickled his nose. Leaning closer, he breathed in her scent, deciding he'd never before smelled anything quite so inviting and feminine.

Tugging his hat more firmly on his head out of habit, he studied the harried faces on the crowded plane and hoped the flight would go quickly. He had to catch a connection to Nashville then meet a friend there to hitch a ride to his next rodeo.

Looking for his seat, he swallowed back a grin when he realized Kenzie sat across the aisle from him. Suddenly, his day looked brighter and he decided not to worry about the connecting flight.

Instead, he had a few hours of uninterrupted time to get to know his lovely traveling companion.

Settling in to his assigned space, Tate turned to see Kenzie leaning back in her seat, eyes closed, hands gripping the armrest with white knuckles.

Reaching across the aisle, he placed his hand on hers and watched her eyes pop open.

"We won't crash, you know," Tate said, trying to coax her smile out of hiding.

"I know, I just hate take offs. I'm fine once we get in the air," Kenzie said, offering Tate a small smile. "It's that awful feeling when your stomach is weightless that gets me every time."

"That's one of the best parts of flying," Tate said, waggling an eyebrow her direction.

"It's not surprising a daredevil like you would think so," Kenzie said, squeezing her eyes shut when the plane roared down the runway and lifted into the air. As the plane gained altitude she let out the breath she'd been holding and relaxed.

"How do you know what I do for a living?" Tate asked. Looking at Kenzie with a wrinkled brow, he tried to recall the information they exchanged. He was certain they hadn't gotten around to discussing why he was going to Tennessee or his career.

"I assumed you're a daredevil by that gleam in your eye and the look on your face that says you love adventure," Kenzie said, not willing to acknowledge she recognized Tate's name and knew exactly what he did for a living. She refused to admit to anyone, least of all him, she had even a passing interest in anything to do with the pro rodeo circuit. That was classified information she'd take to her grave. "You appear to be someone who lives life on the edge."

Tate chuckled. "I guess some people think I do. I ride saddle broncs as a profession. Well, at least I do when I'm not busy ranching. What I really should say is when I'm not gone to a rodeo, I stay busy on our family ranch."

"Is that why you're traveling to Tennessee?" Kenzie asked, trying to think what rodeo he'd be attending. It had been a long time since she'd kept close tabs on the rodeo circuit.

"Yep. I'm meeting a friend in Nashville and then we're off to the rodeo. We're both competing tomorrow," Tate said, removing his hat and placing it on his lap.

Kenzie admired his strong hands as he ran tanned fingers through his thick hair to loosen the band pressed into it from his hat. She wouldn't allow herself to think of that head of light brown hair. Cut short, it was just long enough to have some finger-tempting waves, absolutely meant to torment women.

"Does your friend also ride saddle broncs?" Kenzie tried unsuccessfully to keep her gaze from entangling with his.

From experience gained in what seemed like a lifetime ago, she knew saddle bronc riders were artists, of a sort, as well as spectacular athletes. While bull riding and bareback riding were wilder, saddle bronc riding demanded style, grace, and precision.

“Nah, he’s a steer wrestler,” Tate said, grateful Cort McGraw agreed to swing by the airport and pick him up on his way through Nashville.

Kenzie looked at him thoughtfully before pulling a water bottle from her bag and taking a drink. Once she screwed the cap back on, she turned to Tate. “You said when you aren’t out on the rodeo circuit, you ranch. Where do you live?”

“South of Kennewick,” Tate said, thinking about the ranch his grandfather started back in the early 1900s and his father made successful through unwavering dedication and plain old hard work. “If you head toward Umatilla and take the last exit before you cross into Oregon, we’re about ten miles off the beaten path on the Washington side of the border.”

“I’ve never driven around much in that area,” Kenzie said, realizing in the two years she’d been in the Tri-Cities, she hadn’t done any exploring. She was rarely home long enough to do more than catch up on laundry and visit her one close friend.

“Are you originally from the Tri-Cities?” Tate asked, wondering where Kenzie grew up. She seemed like the very persona of a fashionable city girl, completely opposite of the type of girl he thought would someday fit into his lifestyle.

“No, my family lives in Portland,” Kenzie said, brushing imaginary lint from her skirt. She knew the next question Tate would ask and beat him to it. “I moved to Kennewick three years ago because I needed to get out of Portland. My best friend lives near Pendleton and encouraged me to move closer. I chose the Tri-Cities area because it works well with my job. I spend a lot of time traveling and being close to an airport is essential.”

“What made you want to leave Portland?” Tate asked, stretching his legs beneath the seat in front of him. He hated flying, not because he was afraid of the plane crashing, but mostly because he felt cramped and uncomfortable the entire time. Whoever designed the seats must not have taken long legs and broad shoulders into account.

“Let’s just say the city wasn’t quite big enough to keep from running into my former fiancé and his very pregnant girlfriend,” Kenzie said, a flash of anger firing in her eyes.

At Tate’s raised eyebrow, she shook her head. “It really was for the best. We were at the bakery, doing a cake tasting for our wedding, when this woman ran in and started screaming at Sonny, slapping his face. Apparently, she’d just found out she was pregnant. She demanded he tell me the truth and he confessed he’d been seeing her on the side.”

“More than seeing her, I’d say,” Tate said, indignant on behalf of the woman he’d just met. Her ex-fiancé had to be a certified idiot to mess up a future with Kenzie, but Tate was rather glad he had. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be sitting across from her, enjoying their conversation and hoping he’d see her again.

“Anyway, I ran into them all the time. Since my job isn’t based in a specific area, it doesn’t really matter where I live. When Megan called and invited me to stay with her for a while, I decided to take her up on the offer. Driving from Helix to the airport in Pasco grew old in a hurry, so I rented an apartment in Kennewick,” Kenzie said, giving Tate a smile. “Now you know more about me than you ever wanted to.”

“Hardly,” Tate said, studying Kenzie’s strong cheekbones and creamy skin. He absently wondered if it would feel as soft as it looked. Popping his knuckles seemed the only way to keep from reaching across the aisle and indulging his curiosity by touching her cheek. When Kenzie

cringed at the sound, he gripped the armrest. “Your friend, Megan - is she, by any chance, Megan Montgomery?”

“Yes. Do you know her?” Kenzie’s voice carried a note of friendly interest.

“Yep. I know her husband, Owen. He purchases cattle from us and we’ve bought horses from them for years.” Sharing mutual friends, Tate was surprised he and Kenzie hadn’t run into each other before, since the Montgomery clan liked to entertain and often hosted barbecues and dinners. “Megan’s fed us more than a time or two.”

“Wow. I’ll have to tell Megan I met you, then,” Kenzie said, making a mental note to call her friend later that evening. “When you say us and we, who else lives on the ranch with you?”

Tate laughed and the sound resonated somewhere deep and untouched inside Kenzie, drawing out her smile.

“It’s just me. Well, me and my foreman, Monte, and the ranch hands,” Tate said. “My dad moved into an assisted living facility in Richland about a month ago, so I’m still getting used to rattling around the house by myself when I’m home.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is your father unwell?” Kenzie asked, wondering what type of ailment required Tate’s father to move into an assisted living facility.

“Nothing is wrong with Pop except old age. He turned ninety on his last birthday and finally agreed it was time for him to retire,” Tate said, chuckling. He loved to see the reaction on people’s faces when he told them his father’s age.

Determined to be a bachelor his whole life, Tate’s father, Kent, didn’t know what hit him when he met a beautiful young woman who turned his world upside down.

“I can see by the look on your face, you’re trying to do the math and coming up shy a few years,” Tate teased with a knowing grin. “I’m twenty-nine. Pop was nearly sixty when he married my mama. She was in her late twenties. Most folks thought it was quite a scandal for them to get married, but they loved each other. I don’t think Pop ever recovered from losing Mama. I was about eleven when she had kidney failure and died. We all thought she was in good health, but it seemed to hit her out of the blue. It’s been just me and Pop since. He’s done remarkably well for his age, but the winter was hard on him and he was ready to move off the ranch and into town once spring arrived. He’s in great shape, but I still worry about leaving him home alone. He agreed assisted living was a good option.”

“I’m sorry, Tate. I know how hard it is to lose a parent,” Kenzie said, not wanting to bare her soul to this stranger. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope, but I’ve got a bunch of friends who are as close as brothers and some cousins, however many times removed, who live a few hours away in Grass Valley,” Tate said, smiling as they made small talk the rest of the trip.

When the pilot announced the plane would soon land, they both glanced at their watches. They’d made up most of the lost time.

“I’ve enjoyed this flight more than any I have in a long time, Kenzie. Thank you for talking with me,” Tate said as they landed and gathered their things in anticipation of leaving the plane.

“It was nice to visit with you, Tate. I hope you do well at the rodeo,” Kenzie said, realizing she really did want him to win. It was hard to stay cool and aloof around such a warm, inviting personality.

Despite the alarms sounding in her head to stay far away from him, Kenzie was grateful she had the opportunity to meet the charming cowboy.

“I do, too. It’s a long way to go to not at least place,” Tate said with the grin Kenzie was starting to think of as his trademark. Some irrational part of her wanted to kiss each dimple in his scruffy cheeks.

Arriving at the point where they would go their separate ways, Tate shifted around his bag then placed his free hand on Kenzie’s arm, pulling her to a stop. Taking her hand in his, he smiled, trying to ignore the powerful force surging from their joined fingers up his arm.

“I hope we run into each other again,” Tate said, sincerely hoping he would see the beautiful girl another time. Although he’d just met her, he knew she would linger in his thoughts.

“That would be nice,” Kenzie said, suddenly feeling very shy. “You never know when we’ll meet at the airport.”

“Sure don’t, since we both seem to travel frequently. Wish me luck?” Tate raised an eyebrow at Kenzie, giving her a beseeching look while shrugging his broad shoulders.

“Of course,” she said, smiling and squeezing the hand he still held. Thoughts of how nice his palm fit against hers infiltrated her resolve to walk away and not give Tate another thought. “Good luck.”

“I meant a good luck kiss,” Tate said, giving Kenzie a smile that had charmed many women into doing his will.

“Oh, I... um...” Deciding she’d probably never see the handsome rodeo star again, Kenzie acknowledged she desperately wanted to kiss him. Before she could talk herself out of doing something crazy and completely out of character, she placed a warm, moist kiss to Tate’s tempting mouth and stepped back. Her lips sizzled from the brief contact.

“Ride ‘em, cowboy,” she said, then turned and started to walk away, her cheeks hot and flushed.

“Kenzie!” Tate called after her, stunned by the impact of the kiss.

When she stopped and looked over her shoulder, he shot her a teasing grin. “Make them all dewy-eyed, Miss Dewdrop.”

Kenzie laughed and waved before racing toward baggage claim. Nearly running through the airport, she caught a taxi and made it to her meeting with five minutes to spare.

Chapter Two

Greeted warmly by the leaders of the regional team in Denver, Kenzie quickly began the meeting, going into motivational mode. It took her only a few minutes to have the room erupting in cheers and the women attending on their feet, filled with excitement and energy.

After the two-hour meeting, she spent another hour shaking hands, visiting with consultants, and scheduling one-on-one appointments for the following day.

Finally escaping to her room for a few minutes of quiet before she joined the regional leaders for dinner, Kenzie traded her plain blouse for one more suited to a dressy occasion then refreshed her hair and makeup.

As a corporate trainer for a company that emphasized how their products could make women feel beautiful, Kenzie strived to maintain a polished image. Dressed in suits with tasteful heels, hair styled into a fashionable updo, and makeup minimal but effective, she was the embodiment of a young, successful executive.

Her current life was opposite of how she pictured herself when she was a young girl, filled with big dreams. Sometimes she wished for the simplicity of the life she had planned, before things changed so suddenly and pushed her in an entirely different direction.

Plucking her phone out of her pocket, Kenzie kicked off her heels, sank onto the bed, and waited for her friend Megan to answer.

“Hey, girl, how’d your meeting go?” Megan asked, her cheerful voice making Kenzie smile. The two had been best friends since first grade, when Megan’s family moved to town.

“Fine. I thought I was going to be late because the flight out of Pasco was delayed, but I made it in the nick of time,” Kenzie said. Wondering how to broach the subject of meeting Tate, she decided to jump right in. “I met one of your friends at the airport.”

“Oh? Who?” Megan asked. The sounds of dinner preparations in the background let her know her friend was working while she talked.

“Tate Morgan,” Kenzie said, trying not to let her thoughts wander to how good he looked in his boots and Wranglers as he waved goodbye. Cowboys, particularly good-looking, loaded-with-charm cowboys, were a definite weak spot for her and she needed to avoid them at all costs.

A rodeo south of Portland was how she met her former fiancé. His family had a ranch about an hour out of the city where Kenzie enjoyed riding horses and being in the country until she found out about his girlfriend.

Burned more than once by a handsome cowboy, she knew they were nothing but bad news. Still, she couldn’t quite stop herself from picturing the intense blue of Tate’s eyes, the dimples in his cheeks, or the way the brief touch of their lips completely scrambled her thoughts.

Lethal.

He could be positively lethal to her system if she let her guard down.

“Tate? You met Tate?” Megan asked in surprise. “And? What did you think?”

“He seemed nice enough,” Kenzie said, trying to sound uninterested.

“Nice enough. Did you lose your eyesight on the way to the airport?” Megan asked. The long-suffering sigh she expelled confirmed her frustration with her best friend.

She’d tried multiple times to set Kenzie up on a date with the man, but the girl always found some excuse. Thinking back, she’d never mentioned his name, just that Owen had a friend she really thought Kenzie should meet. “He’s gorgeous, funny, and one of the sweetest guys I’ve ever met. Are you sure it was our Tate?”

“Suddenly he’s your Tate?” Kenzie couldn’t keep the smile on her face from reflecting in her voice. “If he is so important to you, why didn’t you ever mention him before? He’s more than a little famous in the world of rodeo.”

“Because I know how you feel about cowboys, especially rodeo cowboys. I’ve invited you for dinner numerous times when he was here, but you always have some flimsy excuse that I let slide because I love you,” Megan said with the slightest hint of humor.

“You know I don’t want to be set up with a cowboy, any cowboy. Other than Owen, they are all trouble with a capital ‘T’,” Kenzie said, sitting up and glancing at the clock. She had a few minutes before she needed to meet her dinner companions in the hotel lobby. “He did seem nice, though.”

“You met one of the hunkiest and all-around good guys on the planet and all you can say is he seems nice? Did you suffer a bump to the head in your travels today?” Megan asked, sounding exasperated.

“What do you want me to say?” Kenzie asked, stuffing her feet back in her shoes and standing by the bed.

“How about you fell in love with him after one glance and can’t wait to see him again?” Megan prompted.

“You need to get off that ranch and out more, my delusional friend,” Kenzie said “I didn’t fall under his spell although I’m sure, for a cowboy, he is perfectly nice. I enjoyed talking to him, but that’s it. Unless I run into him at the airport, odds are high I’ll never see or hear from him again.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Megan said in a tone that meant she was plotting something.

“Stay out of it, Meg. You know where I stand on the cowboy issue, so just leave it alone,” Kenzie warned, needing to go. “I’ll be home day after tomorrow. Maybe we can have lunch or do something fun.”

“I’d like that. Just let me know when you want to get together.”

Kenzie disconnected the call, grabbed her evening bag and hurried out the door, shifting into what she called her trainer mentality. Her job was to keep the consultants pumped up and excited about their Dew businesses. The best way for her to accomplish that was to show authentic interest and enthusiasm in their success.

Working as a consultant for many years, Kenzie’s inside perspective on how to be successful, combined with a caring personality, made her a magnet to the consultants she mentored. They all wanted to ask her questions, hear her story, gain some insight into how to do their jobs better.

Offering encouragement to the women at dinner and those she met with the following day, Kenzie was grateful for a good night’s sleep before she had to fly back to Pasco. Leaving mid-morning for the airport, she was more than ready to be home for a few weeks before her next regional event.

Making it through security without any problem, she located her gate, bought a cup of coffee, and waited for her flight.

Taking out her laptop, Kenzie finished typing a report for the corporate office about the training meeting as well as the individual appointments she’d held the previous day. She entered notes about consultants she planned to work with over the next few weeks and saved the report before sending it off to her supervisor, who was also the president of the company.

Working for a family-owned business had many benefits, and being able to communicate directly with the president was one she appreciated.

Finished with her work, she started searching online for rodeo scores, annoyed by her curiosity about Tate's standings. His blue eyes, dimpled cheeks, and charming smile had invaded her thoughts with unrelenting frequency the past few days.

"Fancy meeting you here, dewdrop," a deep voice said directly above her.

"Tate!" Kenzie said in surprise, looking up into his incredible eyes, wondering how her thoughts of the man suddenly made him appear. "How did you do?"

"I took first and I'm giving you all the credit," Tate said with an engaging smile that made the dimples pop out in his cheeks and his eyes crinkle at the corners.

"Me? What did I do?" Kenzie asked, confused as Tate took the seat next to her.

"I'm pretty sure that good luck kiss was just what I needed to win," Tate said. Pushing back his hat, he leaned close to her ear and dropped his voice to a deep, rumbling tone. "I might need one before every rodeo."

"Don't be ridiculous," Kenzie said, fighting the shiver snaking its way up her spine at his warm breath on her neck. Unwilling to acknowledge her feelings, she instead changed the subject. "You must have been on an early flight to make this connection."

"I generally get up before the chickens," Tate said, leaning back in his seat and resting his arm along the back of Kenzie's chair.

Thrilled and dismayed at the feel of his arm across her back, Kenzie sat up straight, holding herself away from him. Starting to say something to him about moving his arm, she clamped her mouth shut when three women close to her age came running up to Tate, begging for his autograph.

Swallowing back a sigh and putting on his celebrity smile, Tate got to his feet and chatted with the women. He gamely signed the magazines they held out for him and even posed for a few photos.

One of the fans, dressed in a revealing top with skin-tight jeans and spiked heels, pressed herself against Tate and pulled his head down to whisper in his ear. Kenzie watched as he shook his head and stepped away from the woman.

"You girls travel safe and have a great day," Tate said with a wave as his fans left, resuming his seat next to Kenzie. Hoping the women would find someone else to ogle and leave him alone, their adoration was unwelcome.

At first he'd been flattered by the attention he received from fans but it grew old in a hurry. Some of his fans, with their cloying perfume and hungry eyes, left him feeling unnerved and somehow tainted.

Women chasing after him, throwing themselves at him, and propositioning him was an aspect of his career Tate hated. His father raised him with a healthy respect for women along with a set of strong morals. Besides, he was an old-fashioned guy who liked to do the chasing, not the other way around.

Glancing at Kenzie, he could tell by the tense set of her shoulders and the way she clamped her jaw the women didn't impress her.

"Some of your devoted fans?" Her tone sounded edgy and laced with disapproval.

"Occupational hazard," Tate said with a flirty grin, trying to make light of the matter.

"Humph," Kenzie huffed, shutting down her laptop and putting it in her bag, trying to ignore Tate as the warmth of his arm brushed against hers. She fought down another shiver when his delicious scent floated around her and his minty breath blew across her cheek.

"You want your own autograph? Is that the problem?" Tate asked in a low voice, wondering what she'd do if he placed a kiss on her delicate neck. Her skin looked so soft, beckoning to him.

As often as the woman paraded through his thoughts since she kissed him for good luck the other day, he was amazed he'd been able to stay on the horse at the rodeo, let alone ride it as well as he had. Even sleeping, Kenzie's face floated into his dreams, right along with her alluring perfume.

"Certainly not," Kenzie said, whipping her head around to find Tate's teasing lips just inches from her own. Unprepared for the desire to kiss him racing from her head to her mouth, she leaned back and glared at him. "I'm not one of your... those... women."

Tate chuckled and took Kenzie's hand in his, giving it a squeeze. "I'd never confuse you with one of them, dewdrop. You're a fine lady. I was just teasing."

"Oh," Kenzie said. In all fairness, Tate hadn't seemed particularly interested in any of the women, sending them on their way as quickly as he could. Deciding to give him the benefit of the doubt, she relaxed against her seat and asked him questions about the rodeo.

Although they didn't sit together on the flight back to Pasco, Tate talked her into giving him her cell number before they boarded the plane. He kept them both entertained with a stream of funny text messages.

When he sent a comment about the obnoxious person sitting next to her, Kenzie laughed aloud, drawing the attention of those around her. Tate looked at her over his seat and winked. She shook her head at him, but couldn't keep from smiling.

Walking through the Pasco airport to baggage claim, she found Tate waiting for her. She playfully smacked his arm and gave him a reproachful look.

"You're awful, you know that?"

"I kept you entertained, didn't I?" Tate asked as they waited for the baggage carousel to start rotating.

"That's beside the point," Kenzie said, dropping her heavy bag at her feet as the luggage began to appear.

"Which one is yours?" Tate asked as Kenzie watched for her suitcase among the dozens piled on the carousel.

Kenzie stared at Tate like he started speaking in foreign tongues. Did gentlemen really still exist? Pointing to a bright pink suitcase, Tate grinned, lifting it as if it weighed nothing and setting it next to her.

"Thank you," she said, surprised by his nice manners as she pulled out the handle and draped her shoulder bag over it.

"Should have known it would be the pink one," Tate said, lifting a large duffel bag off the carousel. Throwing his bag over his shoulder, he started to pull Kenzie's suitcase toward the door. "Is someone meeting you or did you drive?"

"I'm over in long-term parking," Kenzie said, trying to take her suitcase from Tate. The look he gave her made it clear he was hauling her suitcase to her car.

Swallowing down a snappy comment about managing for herself, she walked beside him, pointing to her car. He placed the suitcase in her trunk and opened the door for her.

Not quite ready to say goodbye, she stuck out her hand and Tate quickly took it in his. Instead of shaking it, his thumb rubbed softly across her palm and Kenzie couldn't ignore the sparks shooting up her arm from the contact.

Tate's fingers felt so big and strong and perfectly right holding hers. She would have pulled her hand back, but it seemed to have a mind of its own as it nestled against Tate's.

"I'm sure glad we met on this trip, Kenzie Beckett," Tate said, grinning at her, making the dimples pop out in his cheeks.

“It was very nice to meet you, too,” Kenzie said, genuinely pleased he sat beside her the other day as they waited for their flight to Denver. It would be so easy for her to fall for the handsome, charming cowboy, but Kenzie didn’t intend to make that kind of mistake.

After today, she’d probably never see him again anyway.

“Maybe I’ll see you around sometime,” Tate said, not wanting to let go of Kenzie’s hand and walk to his truck, but knowing he needed to get on the road home.

“Maybe,” Kenzie said, finally mustering the strength to pull her hand from Tate’s grasp. “Good luck with the rodeo season.”

“Thanks,” he said, unable to leave without tasting her lips. Dropping his bag, he took a step forward and put his hands on either side of her face.

Gently rubbing his thumbs across her incredibly soft cheeks, he moved closer until his belt buckle brushed against the front of her suit and peered into her eyes. Expecting to see disapproval or surprise, he smiled when he recognized a look of invitation.

Whispering “for good luck,” his lips settled on hers in a demanding kiss that took her breath away, leaving her unable to think of anything except how right it felt to be with him.

Lost in the sensations produced by his insistent mouth, her hands wound around his neck, while his wrapped around her waist, pulling her flush against him.

Stunned for a moment by the impact of the kiss, Kenzie tried to regain her mental footing. Tate dropped his hands and stepped back, making her wish he’d give her another kiss. Opening her eyes, she watched him stride across the parking lot to his truck.

When he turned and winked at her, she waved, cheeks blushing a bright shade of pink almost the same color as her bag.

If she had any sense at all, she’d never see him again, banish him from her thoughts. When it came to gorgeous cowboys, though, Kenzie didn’t always do the smart thing.