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By Linda Warren

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Leah can't tell them the truth—she won't burden her family with what she must face. But being close to Falcon again has reignited the incredible bond they once shared. They were so young then...and some things never change, including their feelings for each other. Leah thought she could walk away. But nobody loves like a Rebel—even though love might not be enough.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Linda Warren loves happy endings. The Rita® nominated author has written 26 books in the last ten years. Drawing upon her years of growing up on a ranch in Texas, she writes about sexy heroes, feisty heroines and broken families with an emotional punch. She lives in central Texas with her husband, and spends her days doing what she loves—creating unforgettable love stories—with happy endings.

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Falcon: the oldest son—the strong one.

A time to forget...

Eighteen years was long enough to wait for his wife to come home. Today Falcon Rebel would stop waiting.

Every time the phone rang he tensed. Every time the news came on and someone's body had been found he could barely breathe until he heard the person's identity. Every time his daughter mentioned her name he searched his mind for reasons why Leah would leave him and their three-month-old baby.

What could possibly justify her actions? It had been a long labor and a difficult birth, and Leah was different afterward. He'd tried talking to her, but nothing worked. She had wanted to be left alone, and then one day he came home to find a note on the bed. It was simple: "I need time. Leah." No *love*. Nothing. Just like that, she was gone from their lives.

Standing on his balcony looking out over Rebel Ranch, his eyes strayed to the tall oaks in the distance shading Yaupon Creek. They'd made love there for the first time. She was a virgin and scared, and he had wanted to make it special for her. It had been, but they were just teenagers playing adults. Getting pregnant in high school wasn't in their plans. They'd gotten married, though, because it was the right thing to do. Leah moved into his room on the ranch and he was sure they could make it. They loved each other.

He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. Love didn't last long when the responsibilities of life took over, and living with family didn't help. They had no time alone except in his room. The harsh realities of life had hit them hard, but still he was sure they could make their marriage work until he saw the note. Everything ended that day and he grew up faster than he had ever imagined he would.

Raising their daughter without a mother had been the biggest challenge of his life, and then his dad had died and his world had come crashing down around him. By then he wasn't sure of anything. All he knew was he had to survive for his daughter. And he had to be strong for his mother and his brothers. The responsibility of the ranch weighed heavily upon his shoulders. He'd donned the mantle of head of the family and had never looked back.

With his eyes fixed on the tall oaks, he had to admit forgetting Leah wasn't ever going to happen. Not until he knew if she was dead or alive.

"Dad!" his daughter, Eden, shouted.

"I'm here." He stepped back into his room and closed the French doors. His beautiful seventeen-year-old,

dark-haired, green-eyed daughter stood in his room with her hand over her eyes.

"Are you decent?"

"Yeah."

Eden had a habit of running in and out of his room whenever she wanted. About two months ago she caught him shaving in his underwear and it had embarrassed her. He was happy to know she had some boundaries. Leah had been a shy, timid girl, but their daughter was just the opposite.

Feisty and outgoing, Eden never met a stranger. And she had a temper that could peel the paint off the walls. Her teenage years had given him more gray hair than he had really wanted, but she was the light of his life and he couldn't imagine a day without her. Soon she would go off to college and he would have to let go. He was still grappling with that.

"Grandma wants to know why you're not down for breakfast. You're always the first one to get a cup of coffee. Are you feeling okay?" She laughed that funny little laugh of hers. "What am I asking? You're healthy as a horse." Then her eyes narrowed as if something could be wrong and she had missed it. "Aren't you?"

He put an arm around her waist. "You bet, baby girl.

Let's go."

They walked down the stairs arm in arm. At the bottom Eden said, "Dad."

"No."

She stomped her foot and they came to a stop. "Why do you always do that? You don't give me a chance to say what I want to say."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I know that tone. You want something that I'm not going to like and you make your voice all sweet and sugary."

"Can you read my mind, too?"

"Yes," he replied and walked into the kitchen. "Morning, Mom."

"Morning." Kate Rebel handed him a cup of coffee. Dressed in old jeans, boots and a long-sleeved Western shirt, she was ready for a day on the ranch.

"Mom, I can get my own coffee."

"Who said you couldn't? There's scrambled eggs, bacon and biscuits on the stove. We have a full day ahead of us."

His mom worked as hard as anyone on the ranch. Just once he would like for her to take it easy, but he knew that was out of the question. The ranch and her sons were her life.

He filled his plate and sat at the table. Eden sat across from him, munching on a biscuit.

"Dad, I want to talk to you."

He took a sip of coffee. "Okay, what is it?"

Eden scooted forward in her chair, her eyes eager. At times when he looked at her, he saw Leah. His daughter definitely favored her mother, but her personality was more like his and that's what worried him.

"I've been thinking. And don't get all frowny face until I finish."

"I don't get frowny face."

Eden rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I know you want me to go to Baylor. We visited the university and all, but I'd rather help Uncle Quincy with the paint horses. I love working with them, and why can't I work on the ranch like everyone else? Why do I have to leave?"

Because I want you to have the best of everything.

Instead of saying that, he took a moment and tried to see this from her point of view. But he hit a brick wall.

"You keep telling me how you'll be eighteen soon and an adult, free to do what you want, go out with your friends and basically have the freedom that you keep saying I deny you. Well, if you stay here on the ranch, guess who's going to be watching over you and dictating what you do and where you go?"

"Ah, Dad."

"You're going to college, Eden. That's my bottom line."

She scooted even closer, her green eyes gleaming. "But listen to what I want to do. Uncle Quincy has this amazing paint. Her name is Dancing Cloud but we call her Dancer. She's fast, Dad. Really fast. Uncle Quincy put some barrels up and I've been barrel racing her. Uncle Quincy says I'm good and that's what I want to do. I want to stay on the ranch and rodeo like Uncle Paxton and Uncle Phoenix."

Falcon took a deep breath to keep words from spewing out. He counted to ten before he spoke. "You want to rodeo?"

"Yeah, Dad. I can do it. I'm really good."

He shook his head, wondering if all parents had this much difficulty understanding their children. Why wasn't she jumping at the chance to go to college? Wasn't that every girl's dream? He had to be careful or he'd lose her in a way he hadn't even thought about.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" His daughter was impatient.

He could put his foot down and say no, but he had to listen to her ideas. She was older now and he had to learn to be lenient. Or at least try.

"School has just started, so why don't you get your rodeo card and attend some weekend rodeos to see how

you like it and see how this amazing horse does before we go changing plans."

She jumped up and threw her arms around his neck. "I love you, Daddy."

"Wait a minute. I have some rules."

She sank back in her chair. "What else is new?"

He ignored the sarcasm. "First, you're not pulling a horse trailer all over the country. Second, you're not going alone. An adult has to go with you. I'll make the first two rodeos and we'll see if this horse performs like you think she can. You may not even like it."

"I will, Dad. I know I will."

He held up a finger. "But I'm still adamant about college. I'm going to insist that you go one year to see what life is like away from home with kids your own age. Deal?"

She thought about it for a minute. "But if I'm doing really good barrel racing why would I want to go to college?"

He cocked an eyebrow and he was sure he had a frowny face.

"All right." She slid out of her chair. "I know I'm not going to win this one, but you'll see. I'm going to be the best barrel racer ever."

His brother Jude, and Jude's son, Zane, came into the room and loaded their plates.

"Zane, if you're coming with me to school you better hurry," Eden said.

Zane stuffed scrambled eggs and bacon onto a biscuit. His grandma handed him a glass of orange juice and he downed it quickly, then followed his cousin to the door.

"I'm in a foul mood so you have to ride in the backseat," Eden told Zane.

"Eden..."

"Okay, he can ride in the front seat, but he has to be quiet."

"Eden."

"Okay. Okay. He can talk, but only ten words."

"Eden, this is a good way to put a stop to all talk of barrel racing. There's no need to be rude to Zane."

Zane winked at him. "Don't worry, Uncle Falcon. I have so much dirt on her I can make her sweat like a pig."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You know..." Eden grabbed him by his backpack and pulled him out the door.

"Isn't it great they get along so well?" Jude took a seat across from him.

"They get along fine," their mother said. "They're both good kids. Eden's trying to spread her wings and Zane is a sweet teddy bear."

"Said like a doting grandmother," Falcon replied, getting to his feet.

"What's the schedule today?" Jude asked. "We still have that load of young bulls to go to Dripping Springs and, of course, fences to mend."

Falcon took his plate to the sink. "You and Jericho can take the bulls and the rest of us can fix the fence on the McCray side. We don't want one animal to get through. It's too risky. We work on that fence all the time, but the McCrays always find a way to break it."

"They only do that to get back at us since the incident with Egan, but I do not want one of you to interact with them unless they go too far, and you know what I mean by that." Their mother made her views clear and they knew what she meant—to use their own judgment when dealing with the McCrays. But she never wanted her sons to back down and they knew that, too.

Falcon glanced out the window to see his daughter backing out of her parking spot. She was avidly talking to Zane, who had earphones on, blocking her out. They really were good friends, but with Eden's attitude it was hard to see that sometimes. She was very protective of her cousin, though. His daughter was a typical emotional teenager and her moods changed constantly. There was no way he'd ever be able to forget Leah. He saw her every day in their daughter.

A time to remember...

Leah Rebel had spent years trying to deal with what she'd done, but each year a layer of guilt was added to her soul. There was no way to justify her actions, so she lived with an enormous burden of heartache and pain. At times she tried to explain to herself what had happened and she always fell short of making it convincing. If she couldn't make herself believe she wasn't a terrible person, how could she make Falcon believe?

It didn't matter, she told herself. The past was over and she couldn't go back and change it no matter how many times she wished she could. She had to go forward and that brought her to right now. To have a future she had to face her past. Which meant she had to face Falcon.

She pulled over to the side of the road to calm her nerves. Up ahead was the entrance to Rebel Ranch. It looked the same as it had the day she'd left, except the brown boards that flanked the entrance looked as if they'd just been painted. One summer she and Falcon had painted the boards. It had been fun, just the two of them making extra money during the summer.

They'd fallen in love in high school. The moment she'd set eyes on Falcon she knew she'd never love anyone else. She was young and naive and believed in true love. How stupid could she have been? Love was more than sex and attraction. It took a lot of give-and-take. Leah hadn't been ready to be tossed into the Rebel family. They'd treated her well, but she was used to a quiet life with her dad and her aunt.

After she'd discovered she was pregnant, Falcon had insisted they get married and they'd moved into his bedroom on the ranch. They'd had no privacy and life became difficult. The only time she had alone with him was in their bedroom. That special time had not given her the security she'd needed, especially with her hormones all over the place.

She wiped her sweaty palms down her black pants. Remembering was like scratching an itch. It only made it worse. And the more she remembered the more she hurt. Over and over the memories flooded her until she felt weak and wanted to turn the car around and drive back to Houston. But it had taken her seventeen-plus years to get to this point and she wasn't backing out now. No matter what awaited her on the other side of those board fences, she was ready to face it.

Just as she decided to drive forward she saw a red pickup headed for the entrance, dust billowing behind it. She was trapped, and waited for someone to recognize her. The truck rolled over the cattle guard and then stopped. The girl inside was talking to someone in the passenger seat.

Leah held her breath. It was her daughter: *Eden*. No one needed to tell her that. She just knew. Her heart raced as she tried to see every detail of her face.

The two seemed to be arguing and then her daughter drove on, not once glancing her way. Leah was grateful for the distractions of a teenager. She backed up and then followed the red pickup. This might be her only chance to see her daughter. Not that she would introduce herself—she wouldn't be able to handle all that emotion. Just looking at her would be enough—for now.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Shirley Kistner:

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