



## Ransom Canyon: A Western Romance

By Jodi Thomas

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**Ransom Canyon: A Western Romance** By Jodi Thomas

**From New York Times bestselling author Jodi Thomas comes the first book in a compelling, emotionally resonant series set in a remote west Texas town—where family can be made by blood or by choice**

Rancher Staten Kirkland, the last descendant of Ransom Canyon's founding father, is rugged and practical to the last. No one knows that when his troubling memories threaten to overwhelm him, he runs to lovely, reclusive Quinn O'Grady...or that she has her own secret that no one living knows.

Young Lucas Reyes has his eye on the prize—college, and the chance to become something more than a ranch hand's son. But one night, one wrong decision, will set his life on a course even he hadn't imagined.

Yancy Grey is running hard from his troubled past. He doesn't plan to stick around Ransom Canyon, just long enough to learn the town's weaknesses and how to use them for personal gain. Only Yancy, a common criminal since he was old enough to reach a car's pedals, isn't prepared for what he encounters.

**In this dramatic new series, the lives, loves and ambitions of four families will converge, set against a landscape that can be as unforgiving as it is beautiful, where passion, property and pride are worth fighting—and even dying—for.**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Compelling and beautifully written." -Debbie Macomber, #1 New York Times bestselling author

"Jodi Thomas is a masterful storyteller. She grabs your attention on the first page, captures your heart, and then makes you sad when it is time to bid her characters farewell. You can count on her to give you a satisfying and memorable read." -Catherine Anderson, New York Times bestselling author

"Thomas knocks it out of the park again." -Publishers Weekly starred review on *Betting the Rainbow*

"Tender, realistic, and insightful, Thomas's latest title deals with issues that will strike an emotional chord with many readers and will appeal to fans of Debbie Macomber and Sherryl Woods." --Library Journal on *Chance of a Lifetime*

"Terrific reading from page one to the end." -Fresh Fiction

"Another winner... Tension rides high, mixed with humor and kisses more passionate than most full-on love scenes. Fans will be delighted." -Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"A fast-moving, engaging tale that keeps you turning pages...Thomas's characters become as familiar as family or friends." -Fresh Fiction on *WELCOME TO HARMONY*

"This book is like once again visiting old friends while making new ones and will leave readers eager for the next visit. A pure joy to read." -RT Book Reviews on *JUST DOWN THE ROAD*

#### About the Author

*New York Times* bestselling author Jodi Thomas is a fifth-generation Texan who sets many of her stories in her home state, where her grandmother was born in a covered wagon. She is a certified marriage and family counselor, a Texas Tech graduate and writer-in-residence at West Texas A&M University. She lives with her husband in Amarillo, Texas.

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*Staten*

Staten Kirkland lowered the brim of his felt Resisted as he turned into the wind. The hat was about to live up to its name. Hell was blowing down from the north, and he would have to ride hard to make it back to headquarters before the full fury of the storm broke. His new mount, a roan he'd bought last week, was green and spooked by the winter lightning. Staten had no time to put on the gloves in his back pocket. He had to ride.

When the mare bucked in protest, he twisted the reins around his hand and felt the cut of leather across his palm as he fought for control of both his horse and the memories threatening as low as the dark clouds above his head.

Icy rain had poured that night five years ago, only he hadn't been on his ranch; he'd been trapped in the hallway of the county hospital fifty miles away. His son had lain at one end, fighting for his life, and reporters had huddled just beyond the entrance at the other end, hollering for news.

All they'd cared about was that the kid's grandfather was a United States senator. No one had cared that Staten, the boy's father and only parent, held them back. All they'd wanted was a headline. All Staten had wanted was for his son to live.

But, he didn't get what he wanted.

Randall, only child of Staten Kirkland, only grandchild of Senator Samuel Kirkland, had died that night. The reporters had gotten their headline, complete with pictures of Staten storming through the double doors, swinging at every man who tried to stop him. He'd left two reporters and a clueless intern on the floor, but he hadn't slowed.

He'd run into the storm that night not caring about the rain. Not caring about his own life. Two years before he'd buried his wife, and now he would put his son in the ground beside her because of a car crash. He'd had to run from the ache so deep in his heart it would never heal.

Now, five years later, another storm was blowing through, but the ache inside him hadn't lessened. He rode toward headquarters on the half-wild horse. Rain mixed with tears he never let anyone see. He'd wanted to die that night. He had no one. His wife's illness had left both father and son bitter, lost. If she'd lived, maybe Randall would have been different. Calmer. Maybe if he'd had her love, the boy wouldn't have been so wild. He wouldn't have thought himself so invincible.

Only, taking a winding road at over a hundred miles per hour *had* killed him. The car his grandfather had given him for his sixteenth birthday a month earlier had missed the curve heading into Ransom Canyon and rolled over and over. The newspapers had quoted one first responder as saying, "*Thank God he 'd been alone. No one in that sports car would have survived.*"

Staten wished he'd been with his boy. He'd felt dead inside the day he buried Randall next to his wife, and he felt dead now as memories pounded.

He rode close to the canyon rim as the storm raged, almost wishing the jagged earth would claim him, too. But, he was fifth generation born to this land. There would be no more Kirklands after him, and he wouldn't go without a fight.

As he raced, he remembered the horror of seeing his son pulled out of the wreck, too beat up and bloody for even a father to recognize. Kirkland blood had poured over the red dirt of the canyon that night.

He rode feeling the pounding of his horse's hooves match the beat of his heart.

When Staten crossed under the Double K gate and let the horse gallop to the barn, he took a deep breath, knowing what he had to do.

Looking up, he saw Jake there at the barn door waiting for him. The rodeo had crippled the old man, but Jake Longbow was still the best hand on the ranch.

"Dry him off!" Staten yelled above the storm as he handed over the mare to Jake's care. "I have to go."

The old cowboy, his face like twisted rawhide, nodded once as if he knew what Staten would say. A thousand times over the years, Jake had moved into action before Staten issued the order. "I got this, Mr. Kirkland. You do what you got to do."

Darting across the back corral, Staten climbed into the huge Dodge 3500 with its Cummins diesel engine and four-wheel drive. The truck might guzzle gas and ride rough, but if he slid off the road tonight, it wouldn't roll.

Half an hour later he finally slowed as he turned into a farm twenty miles north of Crossroads, Texas. A sign, in need of painting and with a few bullet holes in it, read simply "Lavender Lane." Even in the rain the air here smelled of lavender. He'd made it to Quinn's place. One house, one farm, sat alone with nothing near enough to call a neighbor.

Quinn O'Grady's home always reminded him of a little girl's fancy dollhouse: brightly painted shutters and gingerbread trim everywhere. Folks sometimes commented on how the house was as fancy as the woman who owned it was plain, but Staten had never thought of her that way. She was shy, had kept to herself even in grade school, but she was her own woman. She'd built a living out of the worthless land her parents had left her.

He might have gone his whole life saying no more than hello to her, but Quinn O'Grady had been his wife's best friend. Even after he'd married Amalah, she'd still have her "girls' days" with Quinn.

They'd can peaches in the fall and take courses at the church on quilting and pottery. They'd take off to Dallas for an art show or to Canton for the world's biggest garage sale. He couldn't count the times his wife had climbed into Quinn's old green pickup and simply called out that they were going shopping as if that were all he needed to know. Half the time they didn't come back with anything but ice-cream-sundae smiles.

Quinn hadn't talked to him much in those early years, but she'd been a good friend to his wife, and that mattered. Near the end, she'd sat with Amalah in the hospital so he could go home to shower and change clothes. That last month, it seemed she was always near. The two women had been best friends all their lives, and they would be to the end.

Staten didn't smile as he cut the engine in front of Quinn O'Grady's house. He never smiled. Not anymore. For years he'd worked hard thinking he'd be passing on the Double K to his son. Now, if Staten died, the ranch would probably be sold at auction to help support his father's run for the senate or, who knows, the old guy might run for governor next time. Even though Samuel Kirkland was in his sixties, his fourth wife was keeping him young, he claimed. He'd never had much interest in the ranch and hadn't spent a night on Kirkland soil since Staten had taken over the place.

Quinn caught Staten's attention as she opened her door and stared out at him. She had a big towel in one hand as she leaned against the door frame and waited for him to climb out of the truck and come inside. She was tall, almost six feet, and ordinary in her simple clothes. He couldn't imagine Quinn in heels or her hair fixed any way except the long braid she always wore down the center of her back. She'd worn jeans since she started school; only, there had been two braids trailing down her back then.

*Funny, Staten thought as he climbed out and tried to outrun the rain, a woman who wants nothing to do with frills or lace lives in a dollhouse.*

After he reached the porch and shook like a big dog, she handed him the towel. "When I saw the storm

moving in, I figured you'd be coming. Tug off those muddy boots while I dip up some soup for supper. I made taco soup when I saw the clouds rolling in from the north."

No one ordered any Kirkland around. No one. Only here, in her house, he did what she asked. He might never have another drop of love in him, but he'd still respect Quinn.

His spurs jingled as his boots hit the porch. In his stocking feet he stood only a few inches taller than her, but with his broad shoulders he guessed he probably doubled her in weight. "Any chance the clouds made you think of coconut pie?"

She laughed softly. "It's in the oven. Be out in a minute."

They watched the stormy afternoon turn into evening, with lightning putting on a show outside her kitchen window. He liked how he felt comfortable being silent around her. They sometimes talked about Amalah and the funny things that had happened when they were growing up. He felt as if he and Quinn were the leftovers, for the best of them had both died with Amalah.

Only, tonight his thoughts were on his son, and Staten didn't really want to talk at all. As the sun set, the temperature dropped, and the icy rain turned to a dusting of soft mushy snow while they ate in silence.

When he reached for his dishes and started to stand, she stopped him with a touch on his damp sleeve. "I'll do that," she said. "Finish your coffee."

He sat quiet and still for a few minutes, thinking how this place of hers seemed to slow his heart and make it easier to breathe. He finally left the table and silently moved to stand behind her as she worked at the sink. With rough hands scabbed over in places where the reins had cut, he began to untie her braid.

"I did this once when we were in third grade. I remember you didn't say a word, but Amalah called me an idiot after school."

Quinn nodded but didn't speak. Shared memories settled comfortably between them.

He liked the way Quinn's sunshine hair felt, even now. It was thick and hung down straight except for the slight waves left by the braid.

She turned and frowned up at him as she took his hand. Without asking questions she pulled his injured palm under running water and then patted it dry. When she rubbed lotion over his hand, it felt more like a caress than doctoring.

He was so close behind her their bodies brushed as she worked. Leaning down, he tickled her neck with a light kiss. "Play for me tonight," he whispered.

Turning toward the old piano across the open living area, she shook her head. "I can't."

He didn't question or try to change her mind. He never did. Sometimes, she'd play for him, other times something deep inside her wouldn't let her.

Without a word, she tugged him to the only bedroom, turning off lights as they moved through the house.

For a while he stood at the doorway, watching her remove her plain work clothes: worn jeans, a faded plaid shirt that probably belonged to her father years ago and a T-shirt that hugged her slender frame. As piece by piece fell, pale white skin glowed in the low light of her nightstand.

When he didn't move, she turned toward him. Her breasts were small, her body lean, her tummy flat from never bearing a child. All she wore was a pair of red panties.

"Finish undressing me," she whispered, then waited.

He walked toward her, knowing that he wouldn't have moved if she hadn't invited him. Maybe it was just a game they played, or maybe they'd silently agreed on unwritten rules when they'd begun. He couldn't remember.

Pulling her against him, he just held her for a long time. Somehow on that worst night of his life five years ago, he'd knocked at her door. He'd been muddy, grieving and lost to himself.

She hadn't said a word. She'd just taken his hand. He'd let her pull off his muddy clothes and clean him up while he tried to think of a way to stop breathing and die. She'd tucked him into her bed and then climbed in with him, holding him until he finally fell asleep. He hadn't said a word, either, guessing that she'd heard the news reports of the crash. Knowing by the sorrow in her light blue eyes that she shared his grief.

A thousand feelings had careened through his mind that night, all dark, but she'd held on to him. He remembered thinking that if she had tried to comfort him with words, even a few, he would have shattered into a million pieces.

Just before dawn, he remembered waking and turning to her. She'd welcomed him, not as a lover, but as a friend silently letting him know it was all right to touch her. All right to hold on.

In the five years since, they'd had long talks, sometimes when he sought her out. They'd had stormy nights when they didn't talk at all. He always made love to her with a gentle touch, never hurried, always with more caring and less passion than he would have liked. Somehow, it felt right that way.

She wasn't interested in going out on a date or meeting him anywhere. She never called or emailed. If she passed him in the little town that sat between them called Crossroads, she'd wave, but they never spoke more than a few words in public. She had no interest in changing her last name for his, even if he'd asked.

Yet, he knew her body. He knew what she liked him to do and how she wanted to be held. He knew how she slept, rolled up beside him as if she were cold.

Only, he didn't know her favorite color or why she'd never married or even why sometimes she couldn't go near her piano. In many ways they didn't know each other at all.

She was his rainy-day woman. When the memories got to him, she was his refuge. When loneliness ached through his body, she was his cure. She saved him simply by being there, by waiting, by loving a man who had no love to give back.

As the storm raged and calmed, she pulled him into her bed. They made love in the silence of the evening, and then he held her against him and slept.

## Users Review

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